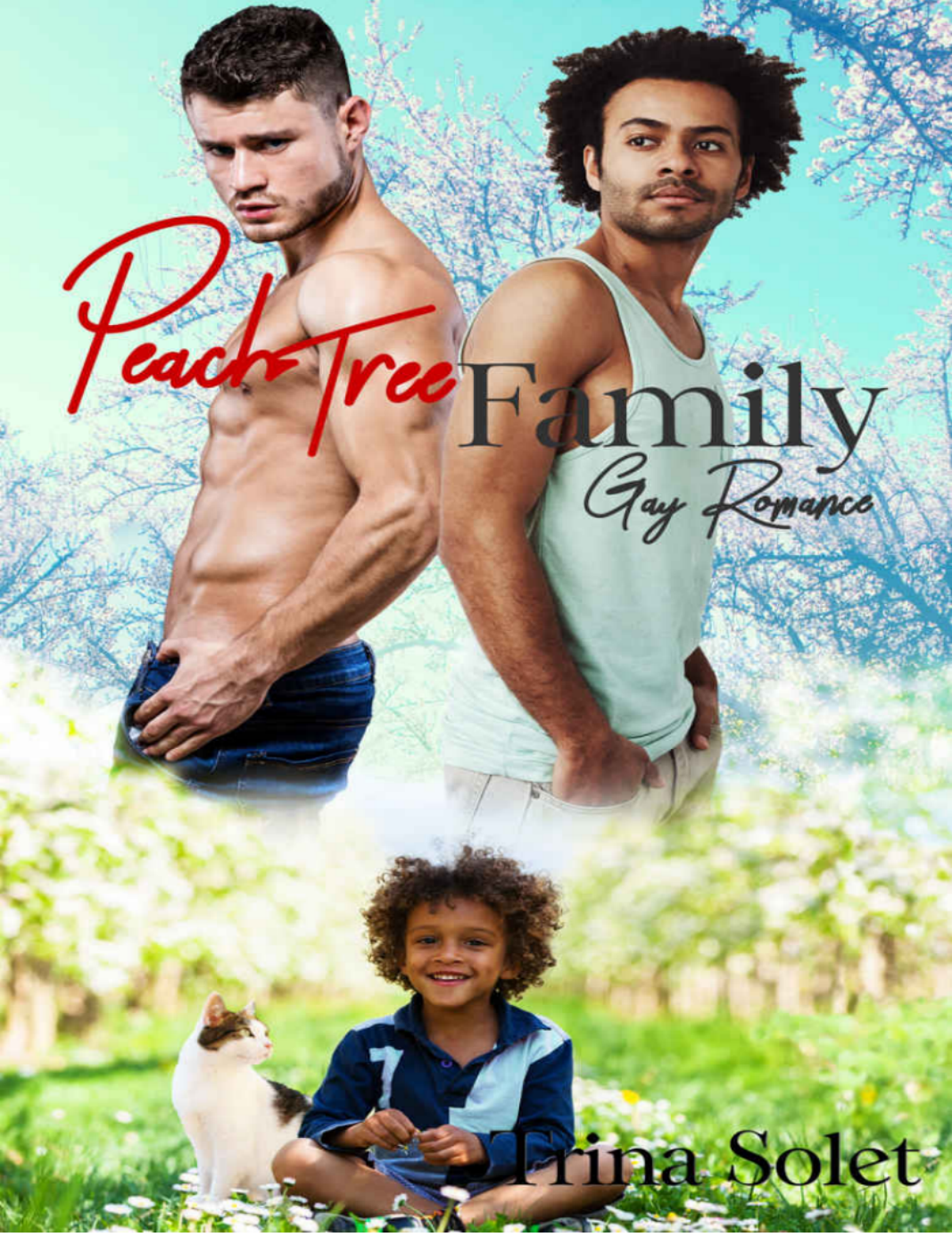
Peach Tree
Family
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

Peach Tree Family (Gay Romance) By Trina Solet
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Peach Tree Family

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32

Chapter 1

Shifting his duffel bag from shoulder to shoulder, Seth walked on the side of the road and watched his shadow get longer. At every step the damp and the chill reached deeper inside him. He was tired, cold, hungry and thirsty, but there was no place for him to stop, just bare trees and underbrush on one side and empty fields on the other. He had seen a sign for a town called Peach Tree, but he couldn't see anything except a hill up ahead.

Even if he reached the town before night fell, he had no hope of sleeping indoors. Not with the little money he had on him. The nagging of his empty stomach told him to save what little money he had for food.

While he was trying to figure out what to do, he noticed that some people in passing cars were eying him and not in a friendly way. The next car might be a sheriff looking to hassle him. Seth moved off the side of the road and started making his way through the wooded area and tried his best not to get lost.

As tired as he was, it wasn't easy keeping his mind clear. After days of walking, he had run out of food, his feet hurt and his head was pounding. He was almost desperate enough to hitchhike but never stuck his thumb out. People still offered him rides a few times, but every time someone stopped for him, he got a bad vibe and just kept walking.

He wouldn't be much better off dragging himself through these woods once it got dark. Going around a thick tangle of bushes had taken him away from the road. That was a good way to get lost and it was likely to rain too.

Looking up at the gray sky and listening for the noise of cars, Seth hit a deep puddle on his next step. As both his feet sank in, cold water flooded his shoes and he cursed. Dead leaves covered the puddle so he couldn't tell it was there. Now he had two sopping wet sneakers and his jeans had soaked up water too.

Like he needed to be sloshing around in wet shoes in this cold weather. Looking for someplace to sit and take his shoes off, maybe get some of the rainwater out, Seth glimpsed a little bit of a roofline and a chimney. A few steps later he could see a porch and a boarded up window. By the look of it, the house wasn't a wreck but no one was living there. The front door had a padlock on it. A No Trespassing sign was posted on the door.

He might be able to get inside, and if not, he could at least huddle up

on the porch, that way if it rained tonight he wouldn't be out there with no shelter.

Maybe his luck wasn't so bad after all.

***

"Are we hobos, Theo?" Ace asked as they left the roadside and started making their way through the woods.

"No. And we aren't homeless. We have a house. We just have to get there," Theo told his little brother as he picked the safest path for them to follow. As they set out on this trip, one of Theo's friends had joked that they were going to be hobos, now Ace was fixated on the idea.

"I don't see a house," Ace said. He hadn't been doubting Theo this much when they were on the bus, but he had only just turned seven. After being on one bus or another for most of the day, they were hiking through dry brush among bare trees in the bitter cold and the little guy's spirits were flagging.

"The house is out here. We just can't see it yet." Theo scanned the ground to make sure they didn't fall in or get tripped up. At the same time, he peered ahead of them, telling himself they couldn't see the house because of the trees and brush. But most of the branches were bare. They should have seen the house already.

It was late in the afternoon, and it had been cloudy all day making for cold and clammy weather. If they didn't find the old place before they lost the light, Theo didn't know what they would do.

Camping out in the brush in this weather would be miserable even if he was alone, but it was out of the question for his little brother to spend a cold, winter night outdoors. Ace was twelve years his junior, and Theo was now finally taking full responsibility for him, taking over from their aunt. But Ace had been scared about where they would live ever since their aunt said she never wanted to see them again and they could go live on the streets for all she cared.

That was the first time Ace had asked, "Are we homeless?"

The truth was that they were. Since he turned eighteen, Theo had been staying with different friends. He wasn't ready to take care of Ace yet, but he couldn't tell him that. He clutched at the only straw they had, and he put some steel in his voice as he told Ace. "We're not homeless. You know our dad left us that house in Peach Tree. Our own house. Doesn't that sound good?"

Theo felt like that was a lie he was trying to turn into the truth, but he had a tiny hope that maybe it wasn't. Maybe the house wasn't in bad shape and they could live there. At least it would take them far away from their aunt's boyfriend and his threats.

While Theo was considering what to do if they didn't find the house soon, Ace pointed up ahead. "Theo, Theo, Theo! I see a house!"

In his excitement, he was ready to run closer, but Theo grabbed the backpack Ace was carrying and stopped him. "You know I have to check it out first," Theo reminded him. Ace already knew the plan but he wasn't so good at following directions when curiosity got the better of him.

They made a slow approach and saw a one-story house with a porch and its windows boarded up. Everything was silent and still except for the two of them and their footsteps. There was no sign that anyone else was around.

As they circled the house, Theo saw the most likely place to get them inside. They didn't have a key, but they did have every right to be there even if Theo had to break in.

Next he picked a hiding spot for Ace. That's where he would wait with all their stuff.

Setting down the huge rucksack he carried, Theo went over the plan one more time. "Here's the phone. You stay here, and I go in and check the place out. If I'm not out every five minutes to wave at you from the side door, you call 911."

"I know, but..." Ace had already made the argument that he should go in to back him up, and Theo didn't need to hear it again.

"No, you can't go with me. I need backup out here, not in there. Now let's do this." He put out his hand for a fist bump.

Ace nodded and bumped his fist. "I'm ready." He was also scared, but this was the best plan Theo had.

He rubbed the baseball cap on top of his little brother's head and moved off as quietly and as cautiously as he could. In his hand, he had a heavy flashlight. If he had to, he could use it as a weapon.

The front door was padlocked and all the windows big enough to climb through were boarded up. The weak spot was a side door that also had a padlock on it, but the padlock was broken.

Going closer, Theo pushed the door open just a crack then stopped. Before opening the door any further, Theo looked in and saw a disused kitchen. He shone the flashlight inside and saw no sign of anyone using the place.

Ready to go in now, Theo took a deep breath and waved at Ace. A small hand went up to wave then gave a thumbs up. That made Theo smile even as his heart raced.

He gave the door a firm push. When it creaked, he stopped. He waited and listened. Nothing.

He went into the kitchen where the fridge stood open as did some of

the drawers and cabinets. After a quick glance, Theo went through then stopped in the doorway to the living room. He held his breath.

Unlike the kitchen, the living room wasn't empty. There was a guy in there. Sleeping on the floor, the guy was covered with layers of clothes, resting his head on a duffel bag. He had dark hair and looked like he was about Theo's age or a little older, his early twenties maybe.

Theo gripped his flashlight tighter. He hadn't turned it on, but he noticed there was some light anyway. It came through a row of three narrow, horizontal windows that hadn't been boarded up probably because no one could have climbed in through there.

Theo wasn't sure how long he stood there frozen, figuring out what do about this guy, when he remembered he had to wave at Ace. Turning to go back out through the kitchen, he forgot about the open cabinet doors. His jacket caught on one of them and it slammed shut.

The noise was too loud to be ignored. Theo turned just in time to see the guy jump awake. Breathing hard, he looked around. He spotted Theo and narrowed his eyes. "Who the hell are you?" he asked as he cast his eyes around like he wanted to know if Theo was alone.

Theo knew he had to stand his ground. He squared his shoulders and stood in the kitchen doorway. "You're going to need to clear out," he said, making sure to keep his voice steady and strong.

"I don't want any trouble," the guy said as he stared at Theo and tried to get his breathing under control.

"Then you shouldn't have trespassed on my property," Theo told him evenly.

The guy scoffed. "No one lives here."

"That doesn't make it free for the taking," Theo informed him. "I'm here to check the house and make sure no one is spreading their trash all over the place."

"That's not trash. That's my stuff," the guy said angrily. He was about to get up, but seeing Theo tense, he stopped and leaned back against his duffel bag. "I don't want any trouble. I just need someplace to stay the night."

As Theo gave him a hard-eyed glare, the guy stayed on the floor like he was staking his claim to it. He had angular features and a good body. His dark blue eyes were sharp, but for just a second shifted to an uncertain look, like he couldn't take a proper measure of Theo. That was fine by Theo since he had to bluff his way through if he wanted to get rid of this guy.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable, but you're going to have to pack up and leave if you don't want me to call Sheriff Jackson." Theo dropped the sheriff's name and hoped that would make his threat more convincing. The truth was he couldn't afford to get the sheriff

involved. His aunt still had legal custody of Ace. Theo planned to change that and this house was a key part of his plan. He wasn't about to let this interloper mess things up for him.

But just as the other guy's shoulders slumped and he sighed like he was about to give up, Ace rushed into the room.

"Ace!" Theo snapped at him.

"It's raining and I heard a noise and you didn't come out, and then I came over and heard you talking in here," Ace said rapid-fire, piling on excuses one on top of the other. Then he looked over at the guy sitting on the floor. "Is that a hobo?"

"Hobo?" the guy said. He was a little unkempt, but he didn't look like someone who had been living rough for long.

"He was just leaving," Theo told him and took his phone from Ace.

"Was he sleeping here, Theo?" Ace asked.

"He was, but he's not any more." Theo tried for a sound of finality, but he knew he had lost a lot of ground with Ace running in like that.

"I'm just crashing here for the night, just passing through," the guy said to answer Ace and to assert that he was staying.

"You are trespassing on private property. You need to leave," Theo told him.

"I should just go on your say-so?" the guy said. "You don't own this place any more than I do."

They were staring each other down, but Ace had his say too. "We do too. This is our house."

"Ace, you need to be quiet," Theo told him, but Ace was distracted by staring at the intruder.

"Look, Theo. Look at all his stuff. He's homeless. Can we let him stay? Can we?"

"I'm not homeless, just moving for work. My name is Seth," the intruder said with a grin.

"Don't talk to him," Theo warned the guy. "Get your stuff together and go."

"So what are the chances you're gonna call the sheriff on me?" Seth challenged him and eyed the phone pointedly, the phone Theo didn't have until Ace came in.

Theo didn't answer which was the same as admitting that the guy was right.

"All I want is to crash here until morning. I'll stay out of your way," Seth said.

"Is there room for everybody?" Ace asked, distracting Theo from trying to figure out how to get rid of this guy. "If there's room, he can stay here too and not have to sleep outside. It's cold and raining."

"It's only drizzling," Theo said.

"Theo, he doesn't even have pants on," Ace said and he pointed at a

pair of jeans that were hanging from a nail on the wall.

"I have pants on. I just took those off because they got wet from the puddle." Seth uncovered his legs to prove it. He was wearing jeans and a beat up brown, leather jacket, but had covered himself with another jacket and some sweatshirts and a sweater. He had no shoes on though. "I stepped into a puddle. It was covered with leaves, and I didn't see it. My sneakers got wet too. They're drying over there."

"Theo, he can't go outside in wet sneakers," Ace pleaded.

"He can go, or I can call the sheriff and have her sort it out," Theo threatened.

"Her?" Seth said.

"Sheriff Sheila Jackson," Theo told him, but Ace was still pleading the guy's case.

"No, Theo, don't call the sheriff on him."

"I won't if he leaves," Theo told him, but didn't take his eyes off the intruder.

"You're bluffing," Seth said.

"Are you, Theo?" Ace wanted to know, and the guy let out a quick laugh until Theo glared at him.

"What if he's armed?" Theo asked Ace to make him realized that this was serious.

Seth frowned and looked taken aback, almost offended. "I ain't armed. I just want to get some sleep."

Theo was about to tell him to leave again when Ace pointed toward three sets of doors in the back. "What's over there?"

The guy told him about it. "There's a bathroom that's best avoided altogether. Two bedrooms with nothing in them. One has a broken window with boards over it."

"Are we sleeping in there?" Ace asked, giving away that they would be staying in the house and weren't just there to check it like Theo claimed.

"I don't know yet," Theo told him. First he had to get rid of this guy.

"I'm Ace. This is my brother, Theo," Ace said while peering around at a short hallway where the front door was.

"Nice to meet you, Ace. Theo," Seth said and raised an eyebrow at Theo's scowl.

"You really need to leave," Theo told him, but Ace just kept advocating for the guy.

"He already fell in a puddle. We have to help him."

"Ace. How about you let me handle this," Theo told him.

"OK. Can I look over there?" Ace asked and tried to go toward the back.

"No," Theo told him sharply and held onto his arm.

"Those two rooms don't have any light," Seth said in a much kinder

voice. "We can all just stay out here. Me on this side. You guys..."

Theo didn't let him finish. "This is our house. You don't get to invite yourself to any part of it."

"I was just suggesting a solution," Seth said.

Theo took a deep breath. He had no way of making him leave. He couldn't call the sheriff unless he wanted to bring trouble to himself. He had no cards to play. "You're gone in the morning," Theo said, capitulating.

Ace was happy and Seth looked relieved. Theo was far from happy. He couldn't believe the position he found himself in. He hoped this wasn't an indication of the kind of luck he could expect.

Resigned to their unwelcome guest, Theo now took a good look at the living room. It was sizable with a fireplace in the center of one wall. Under the narrow windows there was a built in bookshelf. Theo could picture it lined with all of his grandfather's books, but there wasn't even one book left there now.

"Let's go look at those rooms," Theo said and Ace came along eagerly.

It was like Seth said. Theo had to use a flashlight to have a look at two empty rooms that had to be bedrooms. In one bedroom, the window was broken and boarded up tight. So far they only came across old signs of people crashing there. Unfortunately, the bathroom was so dirty it was unusable.

They would have to relieve themselves outdoors and sleep in the living room, sharing the space with a stranger. Of course Theo had no intention of closing his eyes even for a moment, much less sleeping. He just wished he had gotten some sleep on the bus.

He and Ace got their stuff from outside, and Theo got out the peanut butter switches he packed and a juice box for Ace.

"What if Seth is hungry?" Ace asked.

"I'm all right," Seth said but Theo didn't believe him. He noticed the corners of his mouth turn down miserably. The guy was hungry.

"We can spare a few of these," Theo told him as he got out two packages of crackers sandwiched with orange cheese and threw them to Seth.

Catching them, Seth thanked him then ate them slowly like he wanted to make them last. He had an old, banged up thermos and drank from it. "Just water," he said to Ace who did look like he was wondering what was in there.

"I thought it was hot chocolate," Ace admitted.

"You can put other things in a thermos, not just hot chocolate," Theo

told him, but Ace clearly thought that was wrong.

It was getting dark now, and Theo switched on the camping lantern he had brought with them. Ace was warm in his sleeping bag, so Theo turned his attention to Seth. "How did you get here? Hitched?"

"No. It's dangerous," Ace objected before Seth could answer.

"I didn't hitch," Seth told him. "I got a ride from this lady I know who sells at the farmer's market then I walked. I only stumbled on this place by accident. And the padlock was already broken. I didn't do that."

Theo didn't know why, but he actually believed him.

Ace shared with him his version of how they got there. "We walked a long, long way through a forest."

"We just walked from the bus stop up the road," Theo said.

"I cut across this way to get off the road. I was getting some funny looks," Seth said. "When I saw the house, it looked abandoned so I...?

"It's not abandoned. It's our house," Ace said.

"Time for you to go to sleep," Theo told him.

As Theo was getting him settled in his sleeping bag, Ace complained, "I have a sleeping bag, but no one else has a sleeping bag."

"That's OK, You're a kid," Theo told him but Ace still wasn't happy.

"It's not fair."

Theo eyed Seth and warned him, "You'll need to stick to that side of the room, and I don't want to see you up for any reason."

"I'll stay put," Seth told him. He only looked a little offended, but also like he understood.

"The light stays on," Theo said, and he turned down the camping lantern to make sure it lasted.

"It won't keep me up," Seth said and that turned out to be the truth. He was asleep almost as fast as Ace. That left Theo to watch over Ace and watch Seth.

Alert for even a hint of trouble from him, Theo did his best not to see any beauty in the sleeping man, not to admire the angular lines of his face or to wonder what it would be like to kiss his mouth.

Chapter 2

Seth woke up with a grunt, feeling the hard floor under him. He was cold and stiff and the brothers were nowhere to be seen. He blinked remembering those serious eyes of the older brother and the way his voice softened any time he spoke to his little brother.

When it came to Seth, Theo was watchful, ready at every second to deal with him if he should step out of line or try to pull anything. Seth tried not to take it personally. Theo did have a little brother to look out for. He had to think of Ace and protect him.

Seth would have been the same way if he had a little brother or sister of his own. Seeing the bond between the brothers gave Seth a pang of envy. He didn't have anything like that in his life. No one was left for him back home, and he might never find anyone who would care about him in that way.

As he got himself off the floor, Seth heard the brothers outside. For the most part it was Ace he heard. Theo only said a few words now and then.

After packing all the extra clothes into the duffel bag, Seth got his sneakers on. They weren't dry all the way, but there was no helping that.

Going outside through the kitchen door, he looked around. He could hear Theo and Ace, but still couldn't see them. They were somewhere in front of the house.

By the look of it, it was pretty early. The sun was still low. The air was cold and there was a lot of mist between the bare trees.

Rounding the corner, Seth saw Ace on the porch. He was saying. "I can test them out. I'll jump on them."

"No," Theo said sharply. "You'll fall through and get hurt. Get off that porch."

"I wasn't gonna fall in," Ace whined then he saw Seth. "Seth is up!"

"Good morning," Seth said as he and Theo eyed each other. The tension from yesterday was still there. Theo probably just wanted him to leave already.

Ace was friendlier though. "You have to go in the bushes. The bathroom is no good."

"Yeah. I'll just..." Seth pointed his thumb then went off and watered a bare bush then went back to where the guys were poking around and checking out the outside of the house. Ace was leaning down to look

under the porch, and Theo was tapping the posts like he wanted to see if they were solid.

Seth noticed that Theo had on a backpack, but not the big camping one from before. That was still inside, in a corner of the living room.

"Are you guys heading out?" Seth asked.

Theo looked at him over his shoulder, but Ace jumped in to answer. "We're going on an expedition!"

"We need to find the well that's somewhere on this property," Theo explained.

Ace jumped in again. "Then we can flush the toilet."

"After all this time, that might be all the well water is good for," Theo said, but they didn't go off just yet. Theo led the way inside and into the kitchen.

He had a galvanized bucked that he handed to Ace and also a collapsible bucket. "I found this pot we can fill too," he said and hefted a huge enameled pot.

"If you want some help, I can take the pot," Seth offered and then noticed Ace frowning up at him.

"Did you have breakfast?" Ace asked. Seth didn't answer right away, and from that Ace knew the answer. Shaking his head, he turned to his big brother. "No breakfast."

"I'm good," Seth told him. "Don't worry about me."

"If you're helping, we can at least feed you," Theo said and got out two breakfast bars. "Strawberry OK?"

"You don't have to," Seth was saying, but Theo was already pushing the bars into his hand.

"Strawberry isn't bad, but peanut butter is better," Ace said.

"Alright, thank you," Seth said but he didn't start eating yet. "Do you have enough?" He looked over at Ace.

"We're going into town afterward. We'll do some shopping," Theo said curtly.

"I'll be going too," Seth said, not that he could stay behind.

"You said you were moving for work?" Theo said as they set off with Ace a few steps ahead of them.

"Wherever I find a job, that's where I'll stay. The only thing keeping me back home was my grandpa, and he passed." Seth thought about the old man and his long silences and empty eyes. "Small town life just isn't for me."

"So you'll go right past Peach Tree? It is a small town," Theo said and he sounded like he wouldn't regret never seeing him again.

"I won't turn down work wherever I find it," Seth said. "I don't want to end up right back in the same kind of place I started from, but work is work. Can't afford to be picky."

"I'm looking for a job too. So you'll have some competition," Theo

warned him.

They had covered the area north of the house without finding anything, and now they were going a little more east. Ace was always trying to rush ahead, but Theo didn't let him go too far.

"Ace, you stay where I can see you and watch where you're going," he told his little brother. "A well is a hole in the ground, the last thing we need is you falling in."

"I won't fall in," Ace said automatically.

"You know Seth fell into a puddle."

"Yes, please remind me. It's not like my shoes are all the way dry. And I didn't fall in. I stepped in," Seth corrected Theo. "I was real graceful about it. Like a ballerina."

That made Ace laugh, but Theo didn't even crack a smile.

It turned out the well wasn't that easy to fall into. There was a stone wall around it, and it was covered with a manhole cover that had a large stone placed on top of it.

"We have to work to uncover it and we still don't know if there's any water there," Theo said as they approached.

"Only one way to find out," Seth said and he tried to get the stone off by himself, like he wanted to show off or something.

"I want to do it," Ace said and tried to help Seth lift it.

"Pick one more your size," Theo told him and took his place helping Seth. It took both of them to get the stone off.

They lifted up the cover and Theo shined a flashlight down.

"All right, we have water. Now let's see how clean it is." Theo opened up his backpack.

"And you have rope too," Seth said seeing him getting it out and tying it to the handle of the galvanized bucket.

"How else would we lower the bucket down there?" Theo dropped the bucket down and brought it up mostly full.

"It looks clean," Ace said.

"Looks can be deceiving, but it's good enough to flush with," Theo decided and he transferred the water to the collapsible bucket. He lowered the empty bucket back down into the well. "That pot is going to be heavy when it's full of water." Theo sounded like he doubted that Seth could carry it.

Seth stood up a little straighter. "I can manage."

Using the galvanized bucket, they filled up the big pot, covered the well again and then headed back. Ace wasn't happy that Theo didn't let him carry either bucket now that they were full. Seth carried the pot balanced on one shoulder and did his best to make it look easy.

But why was he showing off? Hell if he knew, but he didn't want Theo thinking he was anything but plenty strong. He might not be as sure of himself as Theo, but at least Seth had a little more muscle on

him.

Not that Seth was measuring himself against him, but he did find Theo a little intimidating, maybe because he seemed to know what he was doing and how to go about it. Next to him, Seth felt like something that got cast aside, his only aim any job that would keep him fed, any place that wasn't where he came from.

"It is too heavy," Theo said while frowning at him. "Let me have a turn."

"No. I got it. I was just thinking heavy thoughts." Seth gave him a lopsided smile and Theo shook his head.

"Just don't spill it."

Theo had his hands full carrying both buckets and Ace was still pouting because he only got to carry the rope.

"I'm strong too," Ace said looking from Seth to Theo.

"Your big bro just wants to show off," Seth told him though he was the one who was doing that.

Ace still wasn't satisfied, so he kept flexing all the way back to the house. Once they got there, Theo put his buckets on the kitchen floor and helped Seth get the huge pot off his shoulder.

"Didn't want you to get drenched," Theo said, and Seth shivered when their arms crossed over each other.

"Now we flush?" Ace asked as they went into the bathroom.

"Everyone cross your fingers that it's not clogged," Theo said as he tipped a bucketful of water into the toilet.

By some miracle, it did flush.

"Yuck!" Ace said since the toilet was still filthy even after the second bucket of water went in.

"We have to do some serious cleaning in here," Theo said.

"When it's clean, we don't have to go in the bushes any more," Ace said.

"Right, we're one step closer to civilization," Theo told him and Seth saw him smile. The smile didn't last very long, but it was nice to see. But once again Theo turned serious and practical. "We don't have time to do anything about it. We need to go into town. You're going too, right?" Theo eyed Seth, but it wasn't much of a question. Seth got one night there, now he was out on his ass.

"I'm putting in the padlock before we leave. You want a breakfast bar?" Theo asked Ace.

"Peanut butter?"

"All right. Here you go," Theo said, but as soon as Ace got it, he turned to Seth.

"You want half?"

"He can have a whole one," Theo told him.

"No, I'm all right," Seth said since Theo wasn't having any.

"You get peanut butter since you helped us out," Theo told him and pushed one into his hand. "Thanks for your help with the water."

"I owed you for letting me stay here last night," Seth told him though he knew he hadn't given him much choice.

Theo looked like he didn't want to be reminded of that. "You snore," he told Seth.

"Theo, you snore too," Ace said.

"I didn't get a chance to last night," Theo told him as he went to the big backpack in the living room and got out a screwdriver, a padlock and two metal brackets. Seth couldn't believe he brought things like that with him. Then Theo went to the side door, and Seth and Ace went with him.

"This house belonged to our great-grandparents," Theo said. "Our granddad lived here for a little while. Now the house is ours. Unfortunately, the keys got lost."

Ace watched closely as his big brother screwed in the metal brackets. Seth was looking at Theo more than what he was doing. He was very focused but he looked dead tired too.

"You didn't really stay awake all night, did you?" Seth asked, but Theo only took his eyes off his work to glare at him. "Damn. Sorry about that. But I'll be moving on. I just need to grab my duffel bag, and I'm gone."

"Oh, no. Where are you going?" Ace asked.

"Looking for work. Next place where I'm going to try is Peach Tree," Seth told him.

"That's where we're going too," Ace told him.

Theo was standing in the doorway and screwing in the other bracket now, so Seth couldn't go in yet to get his bag. Then he watched as Theo tested the padlock. Now only someone very determined would be able to get in. Seth found that he was relieved to know the brothers would be a little bit safer here.

Going in, Seth picked up his bag and Theo looked at it disapprovingly and how one side of it was held together by duct tape. "You're going to look for work while carrying that?"

"I don't have much choice," Seth said and turned it around so the duct tape was less noticeable. "It's my grandpa's old bag. The only other bag was his big, blue suitcase or a trash bag."

Theo sighed. "You'll make a better impression without it. If you don't mind coming back for it, you can leave the bag here. As you see, I can lock up now."

Seth was so surprised at the offer he didn't answer right away. "Yeah. I can leave it," he finally said.

"Are we going together?" Ace asked looking between them eagerly.

"We're going to the same place, so we might as well," Theo said.

They went out and headed for the road with Theo showing Ace where the dirt driveway was. It was a little overgrown, but it wouldn't take much to clear it again. Picturing Theo having to do the work himself, Seth thought it was too bad he wouldn't be there to lend a hand. He didn't know why he was thinking that way.

For a while they walked along the road and Ace kept saying, "I don't see it." He couldn't catch sight of the town, but then something did come into view. "I see something," Ace announced.

It was two well-dressed men coming toward them, and Seth noticed that one of them walked with a limp. With them was a good size black and white collie.

"Look, a dog," Ace said excitedly.

"Just don't try to pet him," Theo warned him.

As they got closer, the dog barked but not in a way that was too unfriendly.

"Settle down, Huey," one of the men said to the dog.

"Huey? Is that his name?" Ace asked.

"It is," the man said. He looked like he was hiding plenty of muscle under his coat while the other guy was slimmer and looked kind of snobbish.

"I'm Ace," Ace said like he was introducing himself to the dog. "This is my brother, Theo, and that's our friend, Seth. He's a new friend."

"It's nice to meet you," the snobby guy said sounding all formal. "I'm Andy and this is Leo."

"Nice to meet you as well," Theo said sounding just as formal. "I hope you don't mind if I ask. Are you Andy Brighton, the owner of Stone Creek Inn?"

"I am," the guy named Andy said cautiously.

"I was doing some research about businesses in this area," Theo explained. "I came across your inn and saw some photos of you. And I know the new manager of the inn is Leo Copland." He looked at the guy named Leo, who confirmed he had it right.

"I am Leo Copeland."

"My brother and I just moved here and I'm looking for a job," Theo said.

"We do have an opening. We haven't had time to advertise for it yet. It's an entry level position and you would train on the job," Copeland said.

Theo nodded then looked at Seth. "He's looking for work as well."

"You can both apply. Ask to speak to Mrs. Tamil," Copeland told

them.

"Some computer skills wouldn't hurt," Brighton threw in.

Seth didn't like the sound of that. Computers weren't his thing.

"Thank you," Theo said with a smile.

"It was good meeting you," Copeland said and they moved off.

"Wasn't that lucky," Seth said though he didn't think he stood much of a chance at that job.

"It was," Theo said. He had been very businesslike, but now he looked anxious like he wanted to rush off and apply for the job that very minute.

"It's funny that they were both out here walking together," Seth said, and Theo gave him a sharp, sideways look, but he didn't know why. It made him nervous so he just kept talking. "But meeting up with them wouldn't have done you much good if you didn't know who they were."

"You don't think I moved us here without doing some research," Theo said.

"Guess not," Seth said, not that research occurred to him even as a possibility. He figured he'd just keep moving until he found work and a place to live and that would be that.

"A job at Stone Creek Inn would be a really good fit," Theo said.

"You like hotel work or something?" Seth asked.

"It's not the work so much. It's the location. I can walk there from the house. I'm hoping twenty minutes tops. I just have to get Ace enrolled in school. That's within walking distance too."

Seth looked at him. It was like Theo was always planning, calculating. But Ace didn't like some of his plans.

"School," he grumbled.

It wasn't long before they reached Peach Tree Elementary School and Theo announced, "Let's get you enrolled."

"Nooo," Ace said as he dragged his feet then turned to Seth. "You coming too, Seth?"

"I'm finished with school, thank you very much." Seth was just going to wait for them, but Theo thought he was going on without them.

"Maybe we'll see you in town," Theo said, but Ace wouldn't leave it at that.

"Noooooo. You can't go."

"All right. I'll come with," Seth told him with a smile. He did it because Theo was too quick to think he was bailing on them.

Now Ace sidled up to Seth and whispered, "Tell them I'm a bad kid so they won't take me."

"No sabotage," Theo told him.

In the end the whole thing wasn't too painful and Ace would be starting the next day. Hearing the news, his frown was intense and he kicked some rocks once they got outside. But the town was already in sight, and Ace got excited again.

Seth wasn't. Another small town wasn't where he wanted to be, but as they walked on Main Street and had a look around, he was surprised. Peach Tree might have been a small town, but it was nothing like where he came from.

This place wasn't dead, far from it. Practically every storefront was taken and open for business. The people walking around seemed lively and some of them were nicely dressed, like people ready to spend money.

"Tourist season hasn't started yet. That's why it's so dead," Theo said. "Things pick up when the peach trees are in bloom."

Seth just stared at him. If this was dead, what did this place look like when business picked up?

"You must have visited here a lot," Seth said to Theo and Ace.

"I didn't," Ace said and he looked sad.

Theo gave his brother a small smile. "I did only a few times, and I don't remember the place well. That's why I did research."

"Right," Seth said. He had set out from home blindly, trusting luck though he never had any. All that he knew was that he had to get away from Waterfield before he ended up in jail or worse.

Not Theo. He knew what needed doing and he was ready and able to take care of it. But Seth did wonder how far that went. Theo was out here with only his brother, and he didn't call the sheriff on him when he should have. Seth was reminded of that as the sheriff's office came into view.

Seth didn't like the sight of the place as gut-twisting memories came back to him, but Theo didn't either. He pointedly stared straight ahead as they passed it.

But there were other things Seth noticed as he eyed him, like how his hair moved when he walked and how his eyes were hard like he was daring anyone to get in his way. If Seth had walked around with a look like that back in Waterfield, it would have invited so many beatings. That's why he schooled himself to walk with his head down, his expression neutral. The look in his eyes, his posture, everything about him saying only one thing – I'm not looking for any trouble.

Chapter 3

As they walked through Peach Tree, Seth was looking for Help Wanted signs but didn't see any yet. He knew Theo must be doing the same thing.

Ace was sightseeing, calling out different things he saw. He nudged Theo and pointed toward a boy he spotted just ahead of them. He was a few years older than Ace with a book bag on one shoulder. He was with a girl who was maybe a little younger than Seth and Theo.

"He's going to school," Ace said. He meant to whisper but his whispering was pretty loud.

"Yes, he is," the girl confirmed turning to eye each of them. "He's off to school with a bunch of his friends. There they are. Hurry it up." She pushed the boy and he went to join a girl and a boy the same age.

"You know if anyone around here is hiring?" Seth asked the girl.

"Right here," she said. She pointed her thumb at the Peach Tree Café, which was right on the corner then she practically dragged Seth through the door yelling, "Hey, Rico. I found Magda's replacement." As she shouted, heads turned and Seth was so embarrassed.

"Pipe down, Hannah," a good-looking young guy with dark hair and hazel eyes told her. He then looked at Seth. "It's only temporary, a few weeks maybe. You still want to apply?"

"What apply?" Hannah scoffed. "Mrs. Del Rio will take one look and he'll be hired."

"You're not wrong," the guy told her grudgingly. "But she's not here and I go by the book."

Hannah scoffed again.

The guy introduced himself as Enrico Del Rio and motioned Seth to an empty table in the back. "Go have a seat and we'll get you an application."

Seth looked behind him to see where Theo and Ace had got to. Ace was holding the café door open, but Theo was not coming in.

"It smells good in there," Ace said.

"We can't afford to eat out, remember," Theo told him.

"I'm Hannah, by the way. You two with him?" the girl asked and Ace nodded, but Theo didn't. "You better come in. Your friend is going to need moral support while Rico here grills him."

"Hey," Rico said then followed it up with a sigh. "But once again you're not wrong." He then turned to Ace. "This guy might need you to vouch for him. Can you give him a good reference? Is he a good guy?"

Ace was ready to vouch for him. "Seth is a good guy."

"All I needed to hear," Rico said. Seth introduced them and Rico led them all to the table. "Have a seat. I'll get the application for you to fill out."

"You should apply too, Theo," Seth said and Rico heard him.

"Two applications coming up."

He left them alone and then Hannah brought over the applications before she went to man the counter. Seth looked around and noticed that the walls had pictures of showgirls all over them.

"It smells too good in here, Theo," Ace said and Theo frowned. He must have felt bad that they couldn't afford to eat there.

The smell of food was waking up Seth's hunger too and not gently, it was giving it a good smacking around. If Theo hadn't given him food, he wouldn't have the presence of mind to read the application much less fill it out.

They were both looking over the papers when Rico brought over a stack of dollar pancakes for Ace and a glass of milk. "I already poured the maple syrup," Rico said. "In my experience kids cannot be trusted with a pitcher of syrup."

Ace looked at Theo helplessly.

"It's OK. We can manage it," Theo said with a smile though he didn't order it.

"It's on the house. We don't make people pay for food they didn't even order," Rico said then he walked away.

"Theo, is it charity?" Ace asked. He looked like he wouldn't be able to eat the pancakes if Theo told him it was.

"No. Rico is just being nice and we'll leave a good tip. A really good tip," Theo assured him.

Now Ace smiled and split the stack into three sections.

"What are you doing?" Theo asked him.

"Sharing," Ace said and pushed the plate toward them.

"Thanks, Ace, But I can't eat. I'm too nervous about filling this out," Seth told him.

Theo gave his own reason. "And I need to make sure not to get this application all sticky."

"But it's selfish," Ace complained.

"It's not. You'll owe me," Seth told him. "Next time you have some really good candy, you can give me some. I'm partial to the sour gummy worms."

Ace agreed and they got serious about filling out the forms.

"They don't really need to have a phone number, do they?" Seth asked. He was seeing way too many things he didn't have.

"You don't have a cell phone?" Theo said, surprised. "Put down mine."

"And your address too?" Seth asked as Theo had him copy off his

form.

"I guess so," Theo said.

"And I'll put Ace down as my reference." Seth then lowered his voice. "I got no other references. That's gonna hurt me."

"They don't have to be local. What about from back in your home town?" Theo asked.

Seth shook his head. He could feel his chances of getting this job slipping away.

"A teacher, a pastor, a neighbor," Theo listed.

"Old Moira next door, but she's kind of senile." That was the only person Seth could think of who might say a decent thing about him.

"Put her down. It's better than nothing," Theo told him.

"My previous experience is crap all," Seth said under his breath.

"You must have done something to make money," Theo said while he finished up his own application with no pause or hesitation.

"Washed cars by the rest stop," Seth said.

"Was that a job?"

"Nah, I wasn't supposed to even do it. The sheriff was always chasing me off, and last time he took me in for it. Didn't bother charging me though."

"Damn. Put it down anyway. Car maintenance services, self employed," Theo instructed him. He told him to put down landscaping for pulling some weeds in Moira's garden for which he got paid half a lemon pound cake.

In the end, Seth knew who he'd give the job to and he probably had no shot at that inn. It wasn't his decision though. Rico sat across from them and asked them questions. Theo had better answers every time.

Then Rico explained the deal. "One of our best waitresses had to go out of town. Her sister had twins and an unexpected C section. Magda went to help her out, but we don't know for how long. She will definitely be back. Now I don't mean to rush you... Or maybe I do. One of our other servers called in that she's coming in late today. Which one of you can start right now?"

Seth and Theo looked at each other. Rico stepped away when a customer waved him over, and the two of them got a chance to talk it out.

"You should take it," Seth said. "You need a job right here. I can find work anywhere."

Theo thought for a minute. "No. I want to go and apply at the inn, and I can't do that if I'm stuck here. This one is temporary anyway."

"I have no shot at that other one if they want computer skills," Seth said and made the decision. "Alright, I'll take this and good luck at the inn."

"I need the luck. We have no running water or electricity, and right

now I can't afford to have them turned on," Theo said and Hannah overheard him from over at the next table.

"Where are you living?" she wanted to know.

"You know where the Atkins house is?" Theo asked her.

"I do, but it's all boarded up," she said.

"It won't be for long," Theo told her and he put money down on the table.

"Don't leave that. The owners grandson treated you," Hannah told him.

"I'm setting a good example for my little brother," Theo told her.

"All right then," she said. "It's appreciated."

Theo turned to Seth now. "We'll be buying school supplies and some other things then I'll go to the inn."

"Good luck with that. I hope you get it," Theo told him and put out his hand for a handshake.

Theo didn't do the same right away, but when he did, Seth found that he was holding his breath. Theo's grip was firm, his fingers long, and Seth felt heat rising in him. Why? He didn't know. It was like the warmth of another hand in his had given him a sudden fever.

Then Ace wanted to shake hands with him too, and Seth was feeling alright again as he returned his smile. "Thanks for the reference."

Once they left, Seth gave Rico their decision. "Good to have you with us. The hiring is provisional. The owner, also known as my grandma, still has to approve it, but don't worry about that."

Seth did worry though, and he was sorry to see Theo and Ace go. He reminded himself that they still had his duffel bag at their house so it wasn't like he would never see them again.

There was no time for moping. He had to jump right in, learning the ropes. He bussed tables and helped with some supplies that arrived. If he had a free minute, he was given the menu to memorize plus what was and wasn't in all the dishes.

At lunchtime, he got to wait tables with Hannah looking over his shoulder. She got assigned to train him, and she let him have all the easy customers.

Then just as the lunch rush was winding down, an older woman came in and half the cafe waved and greeted her. She waved at them and threw kisses like she was a celebrity.

"That's the owner, Mrs. Del Rio. She'll give you the final thumbs up or thumbs down. If she doesn't like you..." Hannah made a cutting motion across her throat.

Seth knew his hiring was provisional, but he hoped to have a little more time to prove himself.

The tall, older lady with big, blond hair went around the place chatting up the customers then talked to Rico while eyeing Seth. She

did smile, but Seth was still sweating bullets as he got called over to talk to her.

"There he is. Seth Brewer," Rico said then he left them to it.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Dahlia Del Rio. So you're living out at the Atkins place," Mrs. Del Rio said and Seth hated that he had to start off with a lie.

"I... I'm staying there. These two brothers, Theo and Ace, they were kind enough to put me up," Seth stammered though there was some truth in that.

"I remember that Mike Atkins had a grandson," she said and Seth figured that must have been Theo.

"Ace, the younger brother, is just a little kid. He's never been here before," Seth told her. "The brothers are here to stay. Theo already has his little brother enrolled in school."

"That's real nice. That's a fine old house. I had my eye on it," Mrs. Del Rio said.

"What for?" Hannah asked, eavesdropping again.

"As a short term rental," Mrs. Del Rio said.

"Ah, for the tourists," Hannah said.

"That's right," Mrs. Del Rio confirmed. "The Atkins house has got some sweet rustic charm, but it's better that it stays in the family. I'm sure Mike's grandsons will take good care of it."

"They still don't have water or power turned on," Hannah said.

"We got some water from a well this morning," Seth said.

"I see. I'm sure that will get sorted," Mrs. Del Rio said. Then she gave her approval for Seth being hired and went into the back.

"I knew she'd approve," Hannah said. "She would have scooped up Theo too if she had seen him."

"Scooped him up?"

"Because he's a hottie. Don't tell me you haven't noticed," Hannah said with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

"I... Uhh..." Seth didn't know what to say to that so he just went to refill some water glasses.

All in all, the cafe wasn't a bad place to work. Everyone was nice and Seth already had some tips. At the end of the day, he got to load up on some free food from the stuff that was left over from lunch service. They gave him as much as he could carry. That made his walk back to the Atkins house more of a chore, but he was glad not to be going back empty handed.

He was thinking if he showed up with food, he might get another night's sleeping there. It wasn't too late in the afternoon, but it was overcast and chilly, so he hoped Theo wouldn't kick him out into the

cold. If he did, Seth had no plan for where he would stay.

Even if he got to stay at their house, it wouldn't last. Once this job was over, he would be moving on anyway. It was better if he didn't get used to the warm feeling he got being around the Atkins brothers.

Chapter 4

Seth followed the overgrown path to the house and arrived at the side door. It stood open and he heard Ace chattering somewhere in the living room. Going in, Seth saw that Theo had put in a second padlock on the inside of the kitchen door.

Seth called out to announce himself, and Theo came to meet him in the kitchen.

"That smells good," Theo said, eyeing the takeout bags Seth carried.

But now that he was in, Seth noticed something else. "I smell bleach."

Theo explained. "While we were out shopping we got some bleach tablets. They're easier to carry. I bleached the hell out of that bathroom, and did some cleaning in the kitchen too."

"We have water!" Ace announced then turned on the tap in the kitchen. "And we can flush, we can flush, we can flush!" Ace was singing, but Seth was surprised to hear the news.

"There's water?"

"There was a big car and the water was on," Ace said excitedly.

"That was a handyman that Mrs. Del Rio, your new employer, sent over here to make sure the house didn't get flooded when the water came on," Theo told him.

"She did that?" Seth said as he pulled out containers of food from the bags.

"She also arranged for the water to get turned on. You know something about that?" Theo asked.

"Might be my fault, I talked to Mrs. Del Rio about you and Ace a little bit." Seth could tell that Theo wasn't happy about that. "I don't think I said anything out of line."

"It's fine. It's a relief to have the water on, but I'm going to owe her so much for getting that taken care of," Theo said.

"Mrs. Del Rio seemed like a nice lady and she mentioned your grandfather," Seth told him.

"Ahhhhh," Ace said, at the end of his patience. "What smells so good?"

"Some food from the café," Seth told him with a laugh. "Did you guys eat?"

"We had lunch," Theo said.

"But that was before," Ace said.

It was a little early for dinner, but Seth still said, "There's some chicken here we should eat." He pointed at the dark fridge they were keeping open. It wouldn't keep anything from spoiling.

"I guess if we eat early, I can do some work and not worry about dinner," Theo said.

Seth opened up the different containers to see what they should have, but first Ace checked with his brother. "The food isn't charity, is it Theo?

"I owe you for letting me sleep here and for feeding me," Seth told him.

"We're helping each other out," Theo said but he was still on his guard around Seth.

Ace was satisfied with that answer so they put together some food and ate right out of the containers while sitting on the floor in the living room.

"Thanks for sharing with us, and yes, you can stay here again tonight if you need to," Theo told him.

"Thank you," Seth said, happy to hear that and without having to ask.

He was so relieved to have a roof over his head for at least one more night, and he was glad for the company too though Theo wasn't cheerful. He just wasn't comfortable with Seth there, but he did talk about his plan for after dinner.

"I got some boards off the windows and I'll see how many I can get off before it gets dark."

"I'll help you with that since I'm staying over another night," Seth said.

"All right, thanks."

They went outside. It was overcast and Seth didn't think they would get to work for long. Seeing some tools on the porch, he asked, "Did you bring all these tools with you?" They were all on the small side and looked pretty new.

"I did. I knew there would be work to do here," Theo said.

"You amaze me," Seth said. Theo narrowed his eyes at him like he suspected Seth was making fun of him. "I mean it. I have only one thing of use. These old work gloves. They were my grandpa's but they are still holding up. You want them?" Seth held them out to him, but Theo shook his head.

"No. I've managed without them."

"Then I'll do the hands on stuff. You use the tools."

"Sounds good," Theo said and he started working the boards loose on the window to the living room.

"It will be good to have some light coming in," Seth said as he pulled off the first board.

"And we might have electricity soon too," Theo said. "They're sending

someone out from the power company to check things over, and hopefully we'll have the power on."

"I'm in charge of all the boards," Ace told Seth as he picked up the board he threw away.

"Yes, you're the boss of them. Be careful of the nails," Theo warned him.

As Ace took away one board, Theo pulled off another one, but it came loose easier than he expected. As he lost his balance and stumbled back, Seth was right behind him and Theo fell against him. Seth laughed at the feeling of suddenly having Theo practically in his arms.

"I'm supposed to do that," he told Theo, who blinked at him a few times before he straightened.

Maybe he noticed the weird tremor that passed through Seth's whole body when he was holding onto him. It was really powerful, like a jolt of electricity. To cover up the strange feeling, he asked Theo about the house.

"It was last occupied about ten years ago when my grandfather stayed here after he and my grandmother divorced," Theo told him. "When our granddad retired, he wanted to move back here, fix up the house. Grandma wasn't into that. She wanted them to move to Jamaica, where her family is from. They split up over it and all their other differences. Granddad was into reading and old jazz records. Grandma liked to be around people. She called this place a shack in the woods."

"This place is nice. Looks well built and it's not in bad shape," Seth said.

"My great-grandparents built it, and my granddad fixed it up. And it looks like the windows got boarded up early so they didn't get broken except for that one."

"What do you want to do about it?" Seth asked as they moved over to the broken bedroom window. The boards were put over it from the outside, but some of the broken glass was still there.

"Leave it boarded up, but I want to clear out the glass," Theo decided.

They went inside and barely got any light until Theo turned on the camping lantern. "Let me handle the glass. I have the work gloves," Seth said heading him off before he could get to work on it.

"Be careful." Theo stood to one side as Seth pulled pieces of glass free of the frame. "The window isn't too big. I'm hoping it won't be too expensive to fix," Theo was saying then he stopped Seth as he got ready to break off a stubborn piece of glass. "Let me try something."

As he held the glass, and Theo used the screwdriver and hammer to loosen it from the frame, Seth found himself stuck between him and

the wall. He was so close, brushing up against Seth and making him tingly. Why the hell did that keep happening?

"The first thing I'll be able to afford is paint, but I'd rather take care of the window and the porch," Theo said and Seth was glad he broke the silence that to him seemed heavy.

"How did it go at that inn? Did you get to interview?"

"I did and they'll let me know," Theo told him.

"The short version, huh," Seth said with a smile, so Theo told him a little bit more.

"It's a big place, looks as good as it did online and expensive, there's a gift shop, a restaurant, a tearoom and events halls."

"That would be a good place to work, right?" Seth said.

"It would. But Leo Copeland won't be an easy boss to work for."

Seth had that same impression, but he wasn't worried for Theo. "I have a feeling you'll do fine," he said and Theo looked surprised.

"I have to get the job first," he said as Ace came in to see what they were doing.

Hearing what his big brother said, Ace looked up at Seth. "You think Theo is going to get the job?"

Seth could tell he was anxious. "He has a good chance," Seth told him confidently.

By the time it got dark, most of the boards were off, and they went to have a little more of the food from Peach Tree Café. For Seth it was a nice change to be able to get his fill of good things to eat.

"Now the surprise?" Ace asked when they were done eating.

Theo nodded. "Go ahead."

Ace brought out a bag of candy from a shopping bag and yelled, "Worms!"

Seth laughed as Ace offered him some sour gummy worms.

"Yes, this is all because you said you liked them," Theo told him.

"We're sharing them," Ace said to Theo as he bit into one and made a face at the sour flavor.

"Good and sour," Seth said as he had one too and made a big show of how sour it was to make Ace laugh.

Then Ace pushed the bag at his big brother. "You too, Theo. Make the sour face."

For Ace's sake, Theo put on a act like the sour worms were real tough for him to handle, and he had Ace giggling.

Seth hadn't tasted sour worms for a good long while, and he had only thought of his old favorite because Ace reminded him of things from when he was a kid, good things only, moments when he would forget his troubles and just get lost in a taste of an ice pop or sour

candy, whatever cheap treat he could get his hands on.

By the light of the camping lantern, Ace told Seth about his most exciting video game battles, and the little guy tuckered himself out. Once he was asleep in the sleeping bag, it was just Seth and Theo. They moved to the far side of the living room, and Seth got the lowdown on what Theo would do if the job at the inn didn't pan out.

"My best bet will be something in Ashbury. That's the next town north of here, but getting to and from work on a bus is going to eat up a lot of time. I don't know what I'll do with Ace."

"I'll feel bad for taking the cafe job if you don't get the one at the inn," Seth said.

"That's not a long-term solution anyway. I might find something closer."

"Peach Tree isn't one of those dying small towns. You might find something there," Seth said but he was already feeling guilty. "How did you like the town?"

"Not bad. It had a pretty good vibe. The shopping was decent," Theo said.

"I didn't get to see much of it, just from the cafe windows," Seth told him. "It's nothing like where I came from. Waterfield is a miserable little hole."

"I guess that's why you left."

"Yeah. Finally."

"You said you granddad is gone. Sorry about that. What about the rest of your family?"

"Scattered. What about your folks?" Seth asked so he wouldn't have to talk about his own, but then he realized that Theo might find it even harder to talk about his family.

"We lost our dad a while ago, when Ace was still a baby. A leak at the chemical plant where he worked. Our mom two years ago."

Theo stopped speaking and Seth didn't ask any more. His own parents disappeared from his life, but to have a mom and dad die on them and when Ace was still a little kid too...

"Why is Ace so worried about taking charity?" Seth asked.

"That's my fault. This girl who was trying to get to me through Ace kept giving him stuff. One time he heard me tell her that we didn't want her charity. He took it to heart."

"It's hard to explain to a kid that some gifts aren't free. And I did bring that food hoping you'd let me stay here again," Seth confessed.

"We made an exchange. Nothing underhanded about that," Theo told him.

They went silent for a little bit, and Seth noticed that Theo was

eyeing the fireplace. As cold as it was, he was probably tempted to get it going. "You're not thinking of lighting a fire in there, are you? You're likely to fill the house with smoke. That's if you're lucky."

"I know we can't have a fire until it's checked out," Theo said and gave him a look.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to lecture you," Seth said.

"It's fine. I'll make sure not to burn the house down," Theo said like Seth was nagging him, but he didn't sound too mad about it.

Now Seth was thinking about how they were going to sleep. It looked like there was only one sleeping bag for Ace. Last night Theo had covered himself with some kind of thin, thermal blanket. That guy was all about his little brother.

"You're not going to be awake all night long again, are you?" Seth asked but he didn't wait for the answer. "I know you have your little brother to think of, but..."

"I'll manage," Theo said.

Seth came up with an idea. "What if I close myself up in the bedroom with the boarded up window, you sleep against the door, and we can both get some sleep."

"Are you serious?" Theo asked.

"It's not a dumb idea, is it?" Seth asked since Theo was looking at him like he was crazy. "You'll know where I am, but you won't have to stay awake." Seth then added a request. "And in the morning, you think I could take a shower?"

"Sure. The water is running clean and we have soap."

"That would be great, thanks. Now I'll just move myself into that room," Seth said and got up off the floor and got his duffel bag. He didn't really want to go, but he didn't want Theo loosing another night's sleep because of him.

"What kind of light do you have with you?" Theo asked him as he got up too.

"I have a flashlight," Seth said and got it out of the duffel bag. He turned it on. The beam was weak and it flickered before he tapped it against his palm. "I won't need it much. The dark will suit me fine. I'm good and tired."

Theo nodded. "You did a full day's work, first at the café then helping me here."

"I was glad to pitch in." Seth then thought of something. "I don't have any way to wake myself up for work. I don't want to be late."

"I'll wake you," Theo said.

"At five?" Seth said and hoped it wasn't too early.

"That's fine," Theo said. "Wait. I got this blanket at the store today. It's cheap, but it's better than covering yourself just with your clothes."

"I'll be all right. You keep it," Seth said.

"Take it," Theo said and pushed it at him.

"OK. Thanks. You try and sleep, all right."

"I'll try," Theo said and rolled his eyes. Maybe he thought Seth was nagging him again. He did frown as he followed Seth to the bedroom door. "I feel bad, like you'll be a prisoner in there."

"I'll be asleep. But I wouldn't be able to sleep if I had a little brother and a stranger in the house," Seth said.

"You're not exactly a stranger any more," Theo said, but he wasn't ready to trust Seth and they both knew it.

"Good night," Seth told him.

Settling on the floor and listening as Theo did the same just outside, Seth didn't mind the arrangement. Theo was right outside and hopefully he would get to sleep. Maybe Seth might even hear him snore.

Before, when he was sitting in the dark with Theo, Seth had the funniest feeling. Like a long time ago when he and his friend Jake used to sleep under a tent in the yard. They would huddle close with a flashlight between them and try to scare each other. It was like that with Theo – a little excitement, a little fear and closeness in the dark.

Chapter 5

It was no surprise that having Seth there made things more complicated, but Theo didn't expect the man would stir him up the way he did. Theo should have shrugged off his dark blue eyes and athletic physique and only considered him an inconvenient, temporary guest.

But even the next morning Theo was still wrapped up in the low sound of his voice in the dark, the way he listened and worried all the time, the way the night had turned his eyes midnight blue.

Sitting with him, talking in hushed voices turned into Theo lying against his closed door. It was strange and Theo felt like they were inches apart. He wasn't sure he could sleep then he closed his eyes for what felt like only one minute before the alarm on his phone sounded.

And now it was early and still dark and Seth was taking a shower with that flickering flashlight on the sink to give him light. Theo pictured him soaping up and washing himself in the weird light, the contours of his body shadowy as rivulets slid down over his hard muscles.

Theo couldn't help guessing what his body might look like. He was built, that much Theo could tell even with his clothes on. That's why he couldn't help mentally stripping Seth when he should have been thinking about more important stuff, like planning in case the job at the inn fell through, and making sure Ace was ready for school.

"Do I really have to go?" Ace was asking every two minutes even with his mouth full of food, and now with his mouth full of toothpaste as he brushed his teeth in the kitchen.

Theo only managed to say yes for the hundredth time before he had to answer a call. He stepped away from Ace's toothpaste splattering chatter.

Theo was off the phone just as Seth came out of the bathroom. Doing his best not to stare, Theo couldn't help noticing his wet hair and his reddish skin. Was he like that all over?

"That water is good and cold, but a cold shower is better than no shower," Seth was saying. "It sure wakes you up."

That was something that Theo didn't add to his fantasy as a naked Seth was streaming up his imagination – Seth shivering under a stream of ice-cold water.

"We'll have power soon, and I'll be able to afford the electric bill. I'm

hired," Theo said then he yelled it louder so Ace could hear. He grinned big when Ace ran into the living room and jumped around, celebrating.

"That's great news," Seth said as Ace came over to hug Theo.

When he was done hugging him, Ace took his hand and shook it really hard, so Theo felt like he had been thoroughly congratulated.

Seth looked relieved. "Now I don't have to feel bad about taking the cafe job."

"I was thinking of going to the café today to thank the owner. Now I won't be able to," Theo said.

"Yesterday she came in later. You might be able to catch her after you finish work," Seth said.

"I'll see. I don't want to put it off for too long. She did us a big favor," Theo said while he put his hand on top of Ace's head and left it there for Ace to shake off.

They had a little time, and since Ace was not happy about his first day of school, Theo wanted to do something to remind him that this would be their home. Three framed photos were carefully wrapped and packed so they could bring them along. Theo got them out of the rucksack and then for a while he just stared at them.

One photo was their parents on their wedding day, sitting on a swing decorated with flowers. Then there was a picture of all four of them together. Theo was in Dad's lap, Ace in Mom's, everyone smiling.

There weren't as many pictures of their dad with Ace, but this one was Theo's favorite. Dad was holding Ace high up. Both of them were smiling as Ace was squeezing their dad's face with his tiny hands.

"We might not have furniture, but we have these shelves. I think we can put these up. You want to do the honors?" Theo asked Ace.

"Now mom and dad are here with us," Ace said as he looked at the photos.

"They're always with us wherever we are. And we'll have more pictures when some of our stuff gets sent here," Theo told him.

Seth came into the room and Ace called him over. "Come and look at our mom and dad."

"Those are some good pictures. So your mom was white," Seth said, and Theo looked over at him.

"I look like our mom and our dad," Ace told him. "And Theo looks like me. He's always copying me."

"You're asking to get tickled," Theo warned him.

Ace hunched over protecting his middle then looked up. "I think I see

something," Ace said peering underneath one of the shelves. "I found a treasure."

Seth was looking at the same shelf from the top. "There's a folded piece of paper stuck behind the shelf." He tried to free it then stopped. "It's wedged in there. I don't want to rip it."

"It's probably just a shopping list or something," Theo said, not wanting to get Ace's hopes up or his own, but he couldn't help being curious.

"I still want to be careful with it," Seth said. "I'm going to get under it and push up on the shelf. Theo, you get the paper out."

With his help, Theo got it out intact. As Ace looked up at him eagerly, he unfolded it. It was a piece of lined notepad paper, creased and covered with lines of poetry. He read the title, "Winter Poem" by Nikki Giovanni.

"Granddad read this to me once when I wanted snow for Christmas, but there wasn't any. I was moping and looking out the window. With a book in his hand, Granddad came over and told me, 'Listen to this.' Then he read me this poem."

"Wow," Seth said. "Ace did find a treasure."

"He did," Theo said and rubbed Ace's head. "I remember the poem made me smile."

Ace pointed at the back of the paper. "Your name is on there, Theo."

And it was. On the other side of the paper, he read, "For Theo when he's sad."

Now Theo got so choked up, he couldn't even speak. Tears came to his eyes and Ace hugged him. Seth had tears in his eyes too.

Theo remembered that he just lost his own grandfather. Reaching out for Seth, he squeezed his shoulder.

"Thank you for finding this, guys. It's really special."

Since he was still in the orientation phase with his job at the inn and he learned quickly, it was no problem getting to leave in time to pick up Ace from school. When he had to cover the front desk, it wouldn't be that easy. There had to be some after school activity he could sign him up for, but Theo didn't find anything when he looked online.

Since Ace had been so tragic about having to go to school, Theo expected him to run over now that school was over for the day. But as Theo waited, a bunch of kids dragged Ace over to a very attractive blond guy waiting next to a beige SUV.

"Look! A new kid," a little blond boy shouted at the man.

"His name is Ace," a little redheaded girl said. "Me and DJ already know him."

"Good job discovering a new kid," the blond man said. "Nice to meet

you, Ace. I'm DJ and Ry's dad." DJ seemed to be the quiet boy who was maybe a year younger than Ace and was standing next to him like they might already be friendly.

The little blond boy must have been his younger brother, Ry, and he was back at it. "He used to be our uncle, but he's our dad now. We have two dads. Two! And we have two dogs. Two dogs! Two dads!"

"Settle down, Ry. Does Ace need a ride home?" the guy asked.

"I'm picking him up," Theo said going over. "I'm Ace's brother."

"Hello. Wyatt Hayes," the blond dad said offering his hand.

"Theo Atkins." As they shook hands, Theo decided to pick his brain. "Do you happen to know if there are any after school programs around here? I looked online but didn't find anything."

"The school is working on some activities, but that won't happen till next year. For these guys, I'm the after school program. I work from home, so I can pick them up," Wyatt said while the kids milled around.

"Rico is picking me up so we can deliver the old junk truck," a little blond girl volunteered.

"Rico from the café?" Theo asked.

"You know Rico?" she asked.

"Our friend, Seth, works at the café," Ace told her.

"This is Sammy McEvers," Wyatt said of the blond girl.

"Like the handyman who came to our house?" Ace said and she smiled and nodded.

"Everybody knows everybody around here," Wyatt said with a laugh.

"I'm Gloria," the little redheaded girl said to Theo. "I saw Ace first."

"It's nice to meet all of you," Theo told them.

"I don't see your car," Wyatt said to Theo. He must have been familiar with all the other cars there.

"We're walking," Theo said.

"I like to walk the kids sometimes, but it's been raining on and off," Wyatt said. He was right. It was sunny at the moment but threatening rain. "We can drop you off," Wyatt offered, but his words almost got drowned out by the noise of an old truck rumbling as it pulled up next to them.

Rico was at the wheel and he was pointing at Theo and Ace. "You two are coming with us," Rico said as he leaned out the old truck's windows and cut the engine so he could be heard. Theo was confused and then surprised to see Seth sitting next to him.

"That's our friend, Seth," Ace said excitedly.

"Hi everybody," Seth said to the kids.

"Grandma is dumping this old truck on you guys," Rico said to Theo and included Seth with a wave of his hand.

As Theo looked over at Seth, he ducked his head sheepishly. "I said

how you didn't have a car, and it made it hard to furnish the house and pick up Ace, and then this happened." Seth spread his arms out helplessly.

"Isn't this Mr. Miller's truck?" Wyatt asked.

"It's famous around here," Rico said to Theo and Seth. "Mr. Miller used it to pick up junk, but he can't drive any more because his cataracts is so bad. So Grandma bought it off him as a favor. She didn't know what she was going to do with it, but now it's all yours and I don't envy you." Rico pointed at Theo and Seth both like they were supposed to share it.

"I can't... I mean..." Theo started to say.

"Keep it till you get something better," Rico told him. "Now give it a test drive." Rico jumped out of the truck and pushed Theo toward the open truck door.

Theo just stood there. "I can't drive this."

"I don't mind it," Seth said. He was still sitting on the passenger side. "This is only a little worse than the truck my grandpa drove. If it drives, it's good enough for me."

"It's good enough for me too," Theo said getting defensive. "I just can't drive a stick."

"That's no big. I'll teach you," Seth volunteered, but Theo hadn't actually accepted the truck.

"So what's the plan?" Wyatt asked.

"We're done with our delivery," Rico said. "Mitch is picking me up to do some work. He'll swing by here any minute."

Theo wondered what Rico and Mitch were to each other, but then Sammy asked, "Can I go with the kids and the new big kid?"

"Big kid," Rico said and he winked at Ace. "That's you."

Ace straightened up to look taller.

"He has to meet Barney and Brownie," Ry was saying.

"Our dogs," DJ said. "Can he?" As he sensibly looked from Wyatt to Theo, all the other kids did too.

"You need that driving lesson," Wyatt said to Theo. "You guys take the truck. I'll take Ace with us. Follow us to the house to see where it is and check the place out. Then after your driving lesson, you can come and get Ace."

It was clear Ace wanted to go so Theo agreed. They exchanged phone numbers, and Theo let Seth drive to the Hayes house and just watched what he did.

"It's easy once you get the hang of it," Seth said.

"Driving or telling people about my problems?" Theo asked him.

"Sorry. But you haven't met Mrs. Del Rio. She can't be denied," Seth claimed. "Did you know she was a showgirl in Vegas?"

Theo didn't see how that explained anything. Maybe Seth had a thing

for showgirls.

The drive didn't take too long. Parking in front of the nice, one story house, Seth waved as the kids spilled out of Wyatt's SUV. Then Wyatt opened the front door, and the kids were greeted by two dogs, a brown dachshund and a fuzzy, white dog that Ace was already petting.

Theo and Seth went to the door, and Wyatt invited then inside. "Come in if you can make your way through."

He wasn't kidding. There was a knot of kids in the doorway, and the dogs were demanding attention that Seth was more than happy to give them. Ace was petting the dogs too and laughing as they licked his face.

"I can give you a tour," Wyatt said to Theo as Seth stayed behind with the kids and the dogs.

Going through the living room, Theo noticed pictures of Wyatt with that other dad Ry had mentioned. Some of them were wedding pictures. Theo was happy he lucked into meeting a local gay couple.

"Those are from just this summer," Wyatt said smiling at a wedding photo that included the boys too. "Sam and I got married in the orchard up on the hill."

"That makes for some pretty wedding pictures. The light is amazing," Theo said.

"Sam is amazing," Wyatt said. "You'll get to meet him too one of these days. Actually he works at the cafe with your friend."

"Looking forward to meeting him."

Once the tour was done, Theo and Seth left after agreeing on a time for picking up Ace. Back outside, as Theo got behind the wheel, Seth told him, "I wasn't sure you were going to let Ace come over here."

"Are you kidding me? It was like being caught in a tornado. I had no choice," Theo told him. "And I still can't believe we ended up with this truck?"

"Like I said, I was talking to Mrs. Del Rio..."

"I'm starting to think that you have a big mouth," Theo said, not letting him finish.

"You haven't met that lady. I'd like to see you stay closed mouthed around her," Seth said. Then he told him the benefits of truck ownership. "This truck will come in real handy. Think about it. Shopping for furniture, bringing in supplies for fixing up the house."

"I already owe Mrs. Del Rio, and I haven't even thanked her yet for getting our water turned on," Theo pointed out.

"With this truck it will be easier to go over to the café and thank her. We can head that way and you can drop me off for the dinner shift, thank her if she's there, and then pick up Ace. After you had some driving practice, I mean."

"If I don't crash this thing first," Theo said. They were still parked in front of Wyatt Hayes's house and Theo turned the ignition. "So how do I get us back on the road?" He reached for the stick shift, ready to follow Seth's instructions.

All of a sudden Seth's hand was on top of his and Theo froze. At the unexpected contact, his skin heated and he was afraid to move.

"Sorry, I... I just wanted to show you. Sorry, it's...," Seth stammered.

"Just tell me what to do," Theo said getting over the shivers that had passed through him. The space in the cabin of the truck seemed too tight, and there wasn't enough air though the window was rolled down. Theo struggled to focus on what Seth was telling him to do.

"I like getting to teach you something, Mr. Research," Seth said as Theo practiced shifting.

"Well then, enjoy," Theo said as he screwed up a little.

"So you're not too mad at me for opening my big yap?" Seth prodded him.

"Not too mad," Theo said. "Not walking to work or taking Ace to school on foot is going to be so much better."

"It was good to see Ace making friends already. He won't be hating school so much now," Seth predicted.

"Yeah, he was over that. Did you hate school?"

"I did but I was never any good at it." Seth turned to stare at Theo. "I bet you were, but doesn't that mean you should be in college?"

"Not if I want to make money for me and Ace to live on. Maybe I'll do something online when I can afford it," Theo told him.

"Right. You'll figure it out, I'm sure," Seth said and faced forward again.

They were silent for a while. Theo drove, making sure to find reason to use the stick shift. After they passed the cemetery, he turned onto a dirt road that marked its perimeter on one side. There was a wide spot by some trees where be could turn so they could head back. There he practiced backing up.

During the break in their conversation, Theo had come to a decision. He needed to resolve one question about Seth, so he asked him, "What did you think of Wyatt Hayes?"

Seth thought for a moment. "There's something about him," he said uncertainly.

Theo figured he must be talking about him being gay. "Something that bothers you?" Theo prodded him.

"No, just... He comes off like a man who has everything, I guess."

That wasn't the answer Theo expected. "Everything? Really?"

"I mean he's just happy with his life, his home, his kids," Seth said.

"And his husband," Theo finished for him.

That surprised Seth. "Husband?"

"You didn't see the pictures of the two of them at their house?" Theo asked.

"I admit I was distracted by those two little dogs." Seth didn't say anything more about Wyatt, and Theo wondered if he felt differently about his happy life now that he knew he was married to a man.

Theo couldn't tell what Seth was thinking, but he wanted to make himself clear. "Just don't tell me you have a problem with gay people because I don't want to hear it."

"I don't," Seth said.

"Good. Because for your information, you've spent two nights under the same roof with a gay guy," Theo told him.

While Seth gaped at him, Theo parked under some trees. If things were about to get unpleasant, he didn't want to be in a moving vehicle.

Just then a downpour started and he rushed to close the window. The bare branches of the trees offered no shelter. Sheets of water came down, pounding on the windshield and the hood. Inside the truck, the silence stretched out.

Theo half expected Seth to want to jump out of the truck, or to try to shove him out of it, but he just looked like he was thinking. Theo looked out at the heavy rain, not seeing much of anything else, and that's how he missed the movement next to him.

Seth leaned into his space, giving Theo a dark look. Getting ready for anything, including an act of violence, Theo braced himself. He didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't to have his face cupped in both of Seth's big hands or to have their lips make contact then their tongues.

Stunned, Theo didn't stop the kiss, didn't think, just let his lips move over Seth's, his tongue lick inside. He grabbed Seth's jacket, pulling him in and then realized he should be shoving him away.

It took him too long to drag his mouth away from the unexpected kiss that left him panting. When he finally did push Seth back, Theo found that his hands were weak and shaky. He clenched them in his lap and glared at Seth.

"What the fuck was that?" Theo breathed, pissed off at himself for letting Seth catch him off his guard. He wanted the question to come out strong and angry, not like he didn't know what a kiss was and he needed Seth to explain it to him.

But he didn't need Seth to explain anything. Theo knew what this was. He'd been there before.

Seth thought Theo was making himself available to straight boys for furtive blowjobs followed by threats to keep his mouth shut about it. He shouldn't have parked where he did. It was too secluded.

"Did you think I stopped here so you can have a go at me? Use me?" Theo asked, seething, kicking himself for kissing Seth back.

"I didn't think. I just..."

"I guess I better take you to work now," Theo said.

"Sorry about..."

"Don't." After a few failures, Theo managed to put the car in the right gear and drove back toward town.

He couldn't calm down after that kiss. Why the hell was it so crazy and hot? But that didn't matter. Theo wouldn't give in, wouldn't let anyone use him.

His former best friend had tried the same thing. Theo came out to Damon in his last year of high school, and then everything between them changed.

Damon didn't seem to have a problem with it, and Theo was so relieved, happy to keep hanging out with him. Then one day as they were chilling, kind of bored, Damon proposed a way to pass the time. "You can blow me. I mean it shouldn't be too different from when a girl does it. You guys like doing that kind of thing, right? I'm willing to let you. What do you say?"

"Only if you go first," Theo had challenged him and Damon laughed.

"Oh, hell, no, man." He then shrugged. "Whatever. I'm not dying for a blowie from a dude."

Back then, Theo wasn't even a little bit tempted, not that time or the other times Damon generously offered his dick for sucking. But when he was telling other people what happened, Damon claimed it was Theo who begged to suck his dick and he had to fight him off.

Now Seth had the same idea. Their approach might be different, but they were both after the same thing for the same reason, because they thought being gay was the same as being easy.

Theo just wished he could go back to that moment when the rain started and not just sit there, not let Seth kiss him, and definitely not enjoy kissing him back.

Chapter 6

After what happened when they parked, Seth was surprised that Theo gave him a ride to work. Seth was sure Theo would have rather dumped him on the side of the road.

But Theo did want to thank Mrs. Del Rio and she was at the cafe. While he was talking to her, Theo didn't show how it bugged him to have people in his business. Not that he got a chance. Mrs. Del Rio called Theo a sweet-faced angel and he got a taste of how she was. She remembered his grandfather coming into the café, her first customer no less, and how he used to go to the library to lug stacks of books home with him.

Theo promised to pay her back for the water being turned on, but she wouldn't hear of it. "That was nothing and that old truck is no use to me. So you keep it as long as you need it."

Theo being Theo, he insisted on paying her back, but he also told her, "That doesn't mean I don't appreciate what you've done for me and Ace. Thank you."

After Theo left without a word to him, Mrs. Del Rio turned to Seth. "Just like his granddad, so serious, and I bet he's smart as a whip."

"He is," Seth told her but his mind was on other things he found out about Theo.

Seth didn't know what got into him, but hearing Theo say he was gay did something to him. His brain checked out, and the rest of him moved, touched, tasted.

He got chewed out for it like he deserved, but Theo was wrong about what was going through Seth's head when he kissed him. He wasn't trying to use him or get into his good graces with offers of sex. And he wasn't thinking anything else either. There hadn't been one thought in his head just the sound of rain and the feel of Theo's lips.

The whole time he worked, he felt the kiss and wondered at himself. Theo being into guys was too much of a shock for him to keep his wits about him. It was like Seth got it into his head that Theo might want him.

Well he set him straight about that. But until now Seth didn't know he would want to kiss a guy. He never did before, and he couldn't remember lusting after any guys.

Girls didn't make him drool too much either, not even Sarah Belle when she pushed herself against him and gave him that teasing kiss.

She smelled nice, her lips were soft, but Seth wasn't mad when she ran off laughing.

He wasn't mad because she didn't have him going, but he wasn't quick to get mad in any case. His feelings were locked down so as to keep him out of trouble, or at least worse trouble than he already had.

But in the truck with Theo, with the rain pouring down, it was like someone unlocked his chains, let the shackles fall. Who knows what might have happened if Theo didn't let him know how it was. He didn't think of Seth like that, only as someone who might use him.

That's why when he was done with his shift, he sure as hell didn't expect Theo to show up to pick him up, but he was right out in front with Ace sitting next to him and waving.

If he expected anything it was to have to make his own way to the house and then find his duffel bag dumped on the porch, letting him know to clear out and never show his face again.

Going to the truck with a bag of leftovers, Seth could only see Theo in profile behind Ace's smiling face.

"Seth, we have a truck. It's loud," Ace yelled over the rattle of the truck as Seth opened the door.

"Are you getting in?" Theo asked seeing that Seth only hung onto the door.

"I guess so." Seth was back in that truck and all he could think about was kissing Theo right there. Good thing Ace wouldn't stop talking about the dogs at the Hayes place.

"He's got dog envy," Seth said to Theo while smiling at Ace.

"We can't afford a dog," Theo said.

"Not even a little one?" Ace asked.

"We need to shop for furniture. That's what we're doing tomorrow. We're going to Ashbury. You coming with us?" Theo's voice was flat and kind of angry so he had to be talking to Seth, not Ace.

"Sure," Seth said. He didn't need to do any shopping. His job was temporary and he wanted to save as much money as he could. "You'll need help loading in furniture, right?"

"Not planning to buy anything heavy. I asked you because we're supposed to share the truck," Theo told him, and Seth was sure he didn't want him to go.

But all of a sudden Seth had that same feeling he had back when he first saw Theo at the house and he tried to get rid of him. For once Seth wasn't going to let himself get pushed around. That feeling was back, so he told Theo, "In that case, I need to come along to make sure you don't plow the truck right into a ditch."

That got Theo to turn and glare at him. He was pretty sure it was the

first time he looked at Seth since he kissed him.

"I drove here fine," Theo claimed.

Ace backed up his brother. "He did."

"All right then, I'll just come along to make doubly sure," Seth said with a wink and Ace smiled.

Theo didn't say anything either way and Seth figured that was the best he could hope for.

When they got to the house there was a van from the power company in front.

"What does it mean?" Ace asked. He seemed kind of worried and Theo didn't get too excited either.

"We'll find out if we're getting power, I guess," Theo said as he parked, shut off the engine and went to find the man from the power company.

"Video games!" Ace said as he jumped out of the truck. Now he was seeing the upside.

"You got homework you need to do?" Seth asked, not that he was in charge of him or anything.

"Theo already asked me. I did it with DJ. But Ry wanted to do pencil fighting." Ace did some sword fighting moves.

"Sounds like fun."

"Yeah, but DJ and me did it after we finished," Ace said.

"You're good guys. You know what else you'll have if you get power? A working fridge," Seth said holding up the takeout bags from Peach Tree Cafe.

"I forgot about the food," Ace said.

"Let's take it inside." He and Ace went in through to kitchen door and Seth put the bags on the counter. Suddenly the light inside the open fridge came on and Ace got startled and jumped, then he screamed, "We have power! Power!"

"Do we high five now?" Seth asked and Ace hit his hand hard.

They saw the van from the power company drive away and then Theo came in and Ace high fived him too.

"You're happy," Theo said.

Ace gave him the reason. "Video games!"

"I'm thinking we eat first. Maybe we can heat up some of this," Seth said taking the food he brought out of the bag. Evening was already coming on and Ace went around to see which lights worked.

"Too bad we don't have a microwave," Theo said, but then it turned out they didn't have an oven either. Only the range worked.

Theo had bought a frying pan that came in handy to heat up the rice and then the spicy chicken.

"This is the chicken that goes into the jambalaya. Wish I had some of that adouille sausage for you guys," Seth said.

"This is plenty," Theo told him. He had only said a few words to Seth. That made him worry that Theo might kick him out or tell him he wasn't welcome to go with them to Ashbury after all.

He didn't say anything like that while they ate, but maybe he was waiting until Ace was asleep. With their dinner done, Seth got out three pieces of pie and told Ace and Theo what Mrs. Del Rio said about them, "Something sweet for you sweet boys."

"We're sweet?" Ace said looking from Seth to Theo like he was doubting their sweetness.

"Mrs. Del Rio is just a nice lady," Theo told him.

They ate the pie while Theo checked over Ace's homework. "Good work," he told him.

"I get to play video games as much as I want?" Ace said, his eyes big and bright.

"You get half hour and maybe we'll watch something too," Theo told him and that was plenty good enough for Ace.

"Yes!" Ace said and strutted all around. He was happy and it seemed to Seth that Theo was in a better mood too now that they had electricity. He was plugging in his laptop and other chargers, and Seth could tell all that stuff was important to him. And here he was without even a phone.

They hadn't talked about it, so Seth wanted to make sure he was welcome to stay the night. He was pretty certain that Theo would have told him already if he wasn't, not kicked him out after dark. Seth still mentioned it but lowered his voice so Ace couldn't hear.

"I'm good to stay another night here, right?"

Theo's answer was short. "You are."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"A place with water and power, you're living the life," Theo said.

Seth risked smiling at him, but he didn't want Theo thinking he was trying to seduce him to be allowed to stay. He was going to mind his manners and be on his best behavior.

After eating they settled in to watch some shows Theo had saved on an iPad. They had to sit close to see, and once it got dark, the living room was pretty dim.

Even with the power on there wasn't a lot of light. Some bulbs had burned out, but there was one light in the kitchen, one in the bathroom and the living room got light from a light set into the ceiling above the front door. The bedrooms were still pitch black so Ace's sleeping bag stayed in the living room.

Ace had a good time watching and then playing a game on the PlayStation. At his bedtime, he didn't whine too bad. Before he went to brush his teeth, he came over to high five Theo and Seth.

"We high five at bedtime now?" Theo asked as Ace high fived him up high, down low, then behind his back.

"That was a good one," Seth told Ace.

"It's our special combo," Ace said proudly.

"Looks cool," Seth told him.

"Ace can't stop high fiving once he starts," Theo said shaking his head as Ace went off to the bathroom.

"It's nice. Reminds me of doing that when I was a kid. I'd high five for anything." Seth got kind of sad thinking of it. That was when his hands were little and his heart was lighter, when he had friends, but all that stopped for him after the trouble with his folks.

Looking at him, Theo tilted his head to one side. "Is it making you sentimental or something?" he asked.

Seth didn't mean to drag all that up, but since Theo asked, he told him, "It's been a while since I had anyone to pal around with. The last few years, I was kind of an outcast in my home town. It was because my mom and dad did something, and it made everyone think I was no good. Some people had it in for me. It was too hard to be my friend." Seth was leaving a lot out. He already made Theo mad at him, he didn't want to lose any more of his trust by telling him what kind of cloud he lived under.

Theo was no fool. He must have noticed, but he didn't ask Seth for any more than he was willing to tell. "Sorry to hear that. I remember you said you only stayed for your grandfather."

"He stuck by me when my mom and dad went off, so I figured I should stick by him."

"Your parents left."

"They needed a clean start. I didn't blame them for not coming back to Waterfield. I just wish they had sent for me."

At that Theo went quiet. They both did and Seth wished he hadn't said as much as he did. He wished it even more when Ace came out of the bathroom and asked, "Why is everybody serious?"

"You know grown ups have to be serious sometimes," Theo told him.

Ace made a unhappy noise and headed for his sleeping bag. "We're gonna get real beds tomorrow, right?" he said turning to Theo.

"I don't know about beds, but we'll try and get some mattresses."

"What else are we getting?" Ace wanted to know.

"We'll see what we find and what we can afford. Now climb in there," Theo said and sat next to his sleeping bag.

"Theo, can we play music now that we have electricity?" Ace asked.

"I guess so," Theo said.

"Do it!" Ace said and Theo got up to go and play something on an old iPod he had plugged in to charge. "Dad's music?" Ace said as a song started up.

"That's what you like, isn't it?" Theo said to him with a smile.

"Yeah," Ace said and he settled in as the sounds of some music from back in the 90's filled the room.

Theo zipped up Ace in his sleeping bag, made sure he was warm enough, and then left him to quiet down and fall asleep.

"How was your first day at the inn?" Seth asked keeping his voice low as Theo sat near enough to hear him easily.

"Half day really. It went fine."

From his short answer, Seth thought that maybe he didn't want to talk. Theo didn't go off to play on his laptop or any of the other things he plugged in, and he didn't have his phone out. Like Seth, he was sitting on the floor, leaning against the big backpack. Seth had his duffel bag behind him, and he wondered if he should go and take it to that bedroom and try and go to sleep.

He thought he should but he didn't do it. Having Theo close by didn't seem so bad even if they were just sitting in silence while music played.

Thinking about what else they might talk about besides how work was going, Seth wondered, "What will you do about picking up Ace when you work a full day?"

"I talked to Wyatt and he said he could get Ace along with his boys. He picks up the other kids sometimes and the other parents do the same thing."

"So they take turns?"

"Kind of. It doesn't sound very organized," Theo said like he wanted to see a chart and a sign up sheet. "But Wyatt said the other kids already recruited Ace and he was one of them now. He made it sound like Ace was now part of some cult."

Seth laughed. "Sounds like a good deal."

"I don't know what I'll be doing to repay them." Theo frowned.

"You'll figure it out."

"I don't like taking advantage or owing," Theo said and Seth remembered how Ace worried about taking charity.

"You won't owe. You'll do your part."

"How do you know?"

"That's just the kind of guy you are. Even Ace doesn't like to take charity."

Theo made a face. "I might have gone overboard with that."

"You said that was because of some girl." Seth frowned picturing her

all over Theo and not liking it though he wouldn't have liked it either.

"Yeah, I'm not into girls. I might have mentioned that." Theo's eyes were sharp, drilling into him.

Was he trying to remind him of how quickly Seth was all over him as soon as he found out he was into guys? He was as shameless as that girl who had been after Theo.

Not feeling so shameless now, Seth looked down. "I am real sorry for getting so carried away when you told me. It was just a surprise. I wasn't up to anything."

Theo made a noise like he didn't quite believe him.

Looking over at him, Seth pointed out, "You must believe me at least a little or you would have kicked me out."

Now Theo sighed. "Maybe I do a little."

"And you'll be sleeping over by my door, guarding me?" Seth asked and he couldn't help smiling. In return Theo gave him one of his small, cautious smiles.

Seth couldn't believe how happy and relieved he was to know that Theo didn't hate him. Just that small sign that things might be all right between them made Seth's heart feel like it might be too big for his chest.

Chapter 7

Theo slept fitfully, waking up from dreams that he sneaked into Seth's room. Sometimes he found Seth waiting for him naked. Sometimes he caught him jerking off. Other times Theo found him asleep and woke him with a blowjob.

Glad he was the first one up, Theo stumbled to his feet and to the bathroom to jerk off. His dick had already been too aware of Seth but that kiss in the truck really ramped things up. And Theo still didn't know what to think about it.

Since then Seth hadn't shown any signs that he assumed that Theo being gay meant he was a slut, free for the taking, willing to suck cock on demand.

Of course Theo had been kind of dreaming of that in explicit detail and getting off on it. But that was because Seth was right there and they did kiss.

They kissed. It wasn't just Seth. Theo returned the kiss, enjoyed it, then his brain kicked in.

Still there was something about Seth aside from his hot body and the way he kissed. When Theo wasn't overanalyzing him, he found Seth to be genuine and kind. And Ace liked him too, and that wasn't a meaningless thing to Theo.

Since everything that happened with their aunt and Jerry, Ace had been anxious and more cautious around people. He was coming back to himself since Theo got him away from them. Seeing how well Ace was doing since they came to Peach Tree, Theo knew he it was the right decision even if it was risky.

"We're going shopping together!" Ace said as he rushed through breakfast.

It was good to see him excited and not anxious, but he was a little too happy to have Seth tagging along with them.

Not that Theo really minded. If he was honest, Theo felt an uncomfortable tension when Seth was close, but he also didn't feel the weight of responsibility coming down on him quite as hard. That was probably just Seth distracting him, but it wasn't so bad to have him around.

As Ace was making his last trip to the bathroom, Seth was outside in front of the house, looking over the old truck. When Theo joined him, Seth reassured him, "I'm no mechanic, but it should get us where we're

going and back."

"Good to know," Theo said then they went silent. Seth leaned on the truck with his arms folded, and Theo told himself not to admire the lines of his body or the bulge of his biceps under his old, beat-up jacket. Instead he decided to bring up their living arrangement. "I was thinking, since we're supposed to share this truck, I guess you can stay with us for a while."

"With you sleeping outside my door?" Seth said.

"If we get some beds or at least mattresses, Ace and I can share one bedroom. The one with the broken window is all yours," Theo told him.

Seth nodded. "That would work for me. What about rent?"

"I'm making you sleep in a room with a broken window. It's not like you're taking up valuable real estate. Just chip in for food and help me fix up the place and we'll call it even."

Seth smiled. "Thanks. It's a relief to have a roof over my head at least for a while. I appreciate it."

"I'm not doing you a favor. We both benefit," Theo said with a shrug. He was uncomfortable at how grateful Seth seemed. But it wasn't like he was just keeping a hot guy around the place for selfish reasons. "You've been helpful. It's good to have an extra pair of hands." Now he was talking like he needed to justify his decision to Seth.

He didn't, but Theo remembered how his friends let him crash with them after his aunt kicked him out when he turned eighteen. That was plenty of reason to let Seth stay with them.

When Ace came out, Theo gave him the news.

"Seth is gonna be our roomie," Ace said, looking happy.

"I'm a roomie, huh? Never been one before," Seth said like he got as much of a kick out of it as Ace did. Then the two of them high fived.

They got on the road and the whole way Seth and Ace were telling Theo, "Watch out for that ditch. Watch out for that ditch."

As far as car games went, it was not his favorite, but the two of them didn't get tired of it until they reached Ashbury.

Right on the outskirts they found the first place where they needed to stop. "A swap meet and a farmer's market. That's the place. I'll buy something to cook for you guys," Seth said as they turned into the field that served as the parking lot.

"You'll be cooking for us?" Theo said, surprised.

"I'm helping out with food. That's what you said," Seth told him. "But this time of year, they won't have the good stuff."

As Seth picked out some produce, Theo found he was kind of looking forward to having him cook for them. Seeing him buying vegetables,

Ace wasn't thrilled.

He did nod in approval when Seth got some potatoes, but Theo didn't like what he saw while he was paying for them. The girl selling the produce was very chatty, taking her time giving Seth his change and smiling at him like she wanted to eat him alive.

When Seth turned away from her, he caught the displeased look on Theo's face. "Something wrong?"

Theo denied it and turned away. The rest of the flea market had stuff that was more to Ace's liking, but it was Seth who spotted their first find.

"A tarp. You've got to get this. It has metal grommets for tying it down," Seth said as he looked it over carefully.

"That is a good one, and we'll get some bungee cords too," Theo told him.

"I'm going to find something good too," Ace said then he frantically looked all around and started pointing at random things.

"You win, Ace," Theo told him but Ace gave him a skeptical look since he didn't buy anything he pointed at.

It was Theo's turn to find something they needed. "I see a coffeemaker. The tag says ten bucks. It's mine."

"You didn't even haggle for it," Seth hissed at him as he paid.

"It looks clean and instant coffee just doesn't do it for me," Theo told him.

Before they continued on, Seth stopped them. "All right, from now on, when we see something we like, we pretend we don't really want it to drive the price down."

"Lie?" Ace said.

"Not lie, just pretend," Theo told him.

Moving on, Seth nudged Theo and said. "That lamp."

"Ugly," was all Theo had to say about it but a little later he saw one he did want.

It wasn't to Seth's liking though. "You don't mean that dented, old floor lamp?"

Theo saw it differently. "It's a vintage, brass, cantilevered, reading lamp. It has character."

"What it's got is decades worth of tarnish," Seth said.

But Theo's decision was made. "I'm getting it."

"Wait up," Seth said, the back of his hand resting against Theo's chest as he stopped him. "I don't want a repeat of what happened with the coffeemaker. Let me haggle for it."

Theo didn't take a breath until Seth dropped his hand. "I have more self restraint when coffee isn't involved," Theo told him but let him haggle for it anyway. Seth's low opinion of it did bring the price down though he stopped short of calling it a piece of junk.

"You did the trick," Ace said when Seth came back with the lamp. "You pretended you didn't like it."

"Pretended. Right," Seth said as he handed the lamp to Theo.

"You and Ace can pick one for the other bedroom," Theo told him.

"Me and you together," Ace said to Seth and they high fived. Ace stared hard at all the lamps they came across, but didn't find any that won him over.

He did see a trunk with lots of kids' stickers all over it as well as crayon marks. "I'm calling that well-loved," Theo said and told Ace he could have it.

"I'm gonna pretend I don't like it," Ace said announcing his plan in his version of keeping his voice down.

"Good job whispering. I don't think they quite caught that across town," Theo said to him.

In the end they got the trunk and picked up a rickety folding table and three lawn chairs that they piled in the truck with the rest and covered with the tarp.

Theo had their next stop planned but didn't mention what it was until they pulled up in front.

"Who's getting a cell phone?" Ace asked, getting his hopes up as he saw that they were parked in front of the cell phone store.

"Seth," Theo told him and watched his little brother's face fall. "According to their website, this place should be open. Let's get you a phone."

"Can I afford it?" Seth wondered as they got out.

"We'll see what they have," Theo said and he led the way inside. He knew he should let Seth take the lead, but this couldn't wait.

Of course Seth noticed how impatient he was. "You can't abide the idea of me not having a phone."

"The thought of not being able to look up whatever you want, whenever you want..." He shook his head and shuddered.

"Can't live without your research," Seth teased him.

As they went in, Ace had advice for him. "Get a cool phone with games."

Seth didn't though. He ended up with a low-end model with the cheapest plan. Seth and Ace didn't mind, or didn't know any better.

"Thanks," Seth said to Theo. "I don't know when I would have got around to it."

"I put my number in," Theo told him offhandedly.

"So I can text you," Seth said and then he sent a text thanking him again. It just said, "Thanks Theo."

Looking at it shouldn't have made Theo's heart speed up, but it did.

Next they hit a thrift store. Seth was an asset in there too. Any other guy would have been bored with the kind of shopping they were doing, but Seth was really smart and practical and knew what they needed.

He headed straight to the back and then returned to let Theo know, "There's a pair of mattresses they just got in. They are pretty thin but the lady who works here says they look brand new, no stains."

"That's how I like my mattresses – no stains," Theo said as he went to have a look. "They'll do. We just need one more."

He was looking over the other mattresses they had, when Seth asked, "One more?"

It was Ace who gave him the obvious answer, "There's three of us, Seth."

"I'm good on the floor," Seth claimed and Ace huffed.

"Theo, he's always saying that. 'I'm good. I'm good.' He always wants to leave himself out," Ace complained.

"Alright, alright," Seth said. "I'll get that mattress and I'll pay for it."

Now Theo objected. "That doesn't make any sense. It's not like you can take it with you if you have to move on for a job." He didn't like thinking of that, but it was a fact that Seth would probably leave.

"Look, Theo, I can't please everybody. So I'll get the mattress like Ace wants me to," Seth said.

"Ha ha!" Ace said celebrating his victory while Theo shook his head at Seth for twisting things around on him.

Theo made sure the mattresses were set aside for them then he saw that Ace was showing Seth a brass lamp in the shape of a long legged bird, its head hidden under an ill-fitting, black lampshade. Theo hated it, but he did tell them they could choose the other lamp. He left them to it and went to look at the shelf with used books.

His eyes were running over the spines, when he noticed another guy was also looking at books. Colorful canvass sneakers, dark purple skinny jeans, denim jacket with lots of patches sewn on the back. His hair was shaved to above the ears with the rest hanging over his face in platinum blond wisps. He was slim, and not bad looking.

The guy slowly reached for a book right in front of Theo and seemed to be studying his reaction. When Theo didn't move away, the guy smiled. "I know I haven't seen you around. I would remember," he said.

"I'm new," Theo told him. "If you're from around here, maybe you can tell me some good places to check out." Theo let him interpret

that however he wanted.

The guy looked unsure so he stuck to the safe topic of thrift stores rather than good places to meet guys. "There's a thrift store on Marsh Street you should check out. That's the good one. Here it's mostly household stuff, but I've found a bunch of Stanislaw Lem novels here and some other decent stuff."

"I'll definitely check out that other one," Theo told him.

The guy smiled. "I can tell you about some other places. Maybe over coffee. There's a coffee shop down the block. If you..." He trailed off and stared just over Theo's shoulder. His smile turned from warm to cold and he started to back away.

"Sorry. I guess you're with someone."

Theo was about to deny it, but the guy was already walking away. Turning around, Theo saw why. Seth was right behind him and he was looking grim.

"What's your problem?" Theo snapped at him.

"What do you mean?" Seth seemed honestly confused.

"Were you just glaring at that guy?"

"I don't know. I didn't mean to, but he gave me a funny look. Like he was laughing at me," Seth said.

"Laughing at you?"

"Like, 'Look at this dumb loser,'" Seth said with a shrug.

"So you were warning him? Trying to scare the smirk off his face?"

"No. I didn't mean to. I don't pick fights," Seth said.

Theo sighed. He was mad that Seth chased away that guy, but if he was that quick to run maybe he wasn't worth much anyway.

"OK. But I don't think he was laughing at you," Theo told him.

"I am wearing my grandpa's old jacket. I thought we might have furniture to carry, and I didn't want to mess up my other one," Seth said and looked down at himself critically.

"You look fine," Theo told him and tried not to put any emphasis on the last word. Seriously, Seth could wear a garbage bag and look hot.

That kind of thinking got Theo to pick up a cheap, full-length mirror. "I want to make sure I look decent for work," he told Seth.

"You don't need an excuse."

"It's not an excuse." It's not like he wanted to make sure he looked good for Seth. "I'm not vain. I just want to look professional."

After the thrift store, it was a discount store where they got the cheapest sheets and pillows money could buy and some more stuff for the house, like kitchen stuff and light bulbs. Then Theo spotted a stack

of tshirts.

"The weather is going to get warm. You'll need these," he told Seth, but the reason he was staring at them was because he was picturing a tight t-shirt stretched over Seth's chest then peeled right off him. Damn it.

"If you think I should get some, I guess I should," Seth said, and then Theo couldn't help picking out two different blue ones that highlighted his eyes.

"Get these," Theo said like he didn't care if he did or not.

They had skipped lunch, but before they did any food shopping, Theo wanted them to eat so they walked around looking for a place. Ace had a few snacks already, but his eyes went wide when he spotted a pizza place.

"Pizza. Pizza," Ace was whispering.

"It's on me," Seth said. Seeing how Theo looked at him, he reminded him, "You put me in charge of food.

"I don't remember it that way."

"You can't be the boss of everybody, Theo," Ace told him.

"You said I could chip in for food. Pizza is food. We did some good shopping and worked up an appetite," Seth said and Ace agreed with a nod.

"You two need to stop teaming up against me," Theo told them.

As they sat down to eat the pizza, which was decent enough, Theo thought that they had a good day and how nice it was to hang out with Seth. But that kiss still pissed him off, made him think things could go somewhere with Seth when they couldn't.

"Thanks for the pizza," Theo told him afterward.

"Thanks for letting me come along," Seth said and he looked down shyly.

"You were a big help. You have a good eye for what we need."

"We just need some more food for me to cook up for you guys." Seth smiled like he was really looking forward to it, and Theo had to remind himself that all they had was a temporary arrangement. Seth's sunny smile and the warm look in his eyes meant nothing no matter how long they gazed at each other like idiots.

Chapter 8

Though they were going back to Peach Tree together, Seth was sorry to have their trip to Ashbury end. He didn't get to have a day like this since he was a kid and his parents were around. But there was something else too. It was Theo and what it felt like walking next to him, touching him just by accident, and getting the shirts he picked out.

On their way out of town, Seth saw a cardboard sign for a yard sale that pointed toward the storage rental place they were about to pass. "Do you want to check that out?" Seth asked. They were already stopped at a light and it would be an easy turn.

"It's probably not worth a stop," Theo said but Ace made a whining sound so he turned where the sign was pointing. "All right. A quick stop."

They parked just outside the storage place then walked until they found the storage unit that was set up like a garage sale. Seth spotted a chest of drawers, but it looked pretty bad when he got closer. There was nothing else worth looking at, and he had to admit Theo was right.

"Not worth stopping for after all," Seth whispered so the old man who was eyeballing them wouldn't hear.

Now only Ace was still looking at stuff. There were some toys all jumbled up together in a cardboard box and Ace reached for one.

"Don't touch that!" the old man snapped at Ace and made him jump.

Theo took Ace's hand and glared at the old man. "Don't worry about it. We won't be touching any of your junk or buying any of your junk."

"Buy?" The old man snorted. "All your kind does is steal."

"Keep your ignorance to yourself, old man," Theo told him, his voice harsh and angry.

"Is this guy bothering you, pops?" a big guy asked coming out of the next unit over. He set down a box and swaggered over to them.

Theo pushed Ace toward Seth and wheeled on the newcomer, getting right in his face. "You looking to start something with me?"

The guy looked tougher and meaner than Theo, but then some girl with flashy nails grabbed the guy's arm. "Ray, I swear to God, if you get into anything... Did you forget we're going to my sister's? You are not showing up with bruises and a split lip again. Come on." She dragged him away.

Once they were gone, Theo turned to glare at the old man one more time then they moved on too. "I'm done with this place. Let's go," he

said keeping an arm around Ace.

"You could stand to examine your sense of self-preservation, you know," Seth said under his breath once they had gone a few steps. He had to get close so Theo could hear him but not Ace. He also found the press of his arm against Theo's comforting.

"I'm not letting anyone push me around," Theo said, and his voice still held an edge of anger.

"I could have handled it and you could have stayed with Ace," Seth told him.

"Let you fight my battles?" Theo said like it was unthinkable. "No, thank you."

That did sting, but maybe Theo was right. No matter how strong he was, Seth was never any good at fighting his own battles. He only got himself into more trouble that way. There was no reason for Theo to trust him to defend him and Ace.

But now Ace looked gloomy, staring at the ground and Seth hated that old man even more seeing how he spoiled the day for him.

"That old man was in the wrong, not you," Seth told him.

"I'll talk to my brother," Theo said and put both hands on Ace's shoulders and leaned down so their foreheads bumped. "What Seth said is true. You didn't do anything wrong. You're allowed to touch stuff that people have out for sale as long as you're careful and don't touch anything breakable. That old man had no right to talk to you like that. You're a good kid."

"That old man was like Jerry," Ace said.

Seth didn't know who that was but Theo did. "He was, but you don't need to worry about him any more."

"I was scared," Ace admitted. "Could you beat up that other guy, Theo?"

"I can handle myself," Theo said.

"Don't forget, I was there too," Seth told him and got a small glare from Theo like he knew he would.

"Like backup?" Ace said, his face brightening, so at least he liked what Seth said.

"Right," Seth told him, but Theo wasn't happy to hear him talk like that. He really did think Seth wasn't to be relied on. But then he remembered that Theo pushed Ace toward him, so at least he trusted him to keep his little brother out of the fray.

Ace was still looking down so Theo said, "Let's check out what's around here. We're not in that much of a hurry."

They left the truck where it was and walked around then Ace stopped and pointed. "Theo, what's that place?"

"Oh, no," Theo said seeing the sign for Ashbury Animal Shelter.

"Is that where they have dogs?" Ace asked, his spirits rising.

Theo grumbled then admitted, "Yes."

"Can't we just go and look at them?" Ace asked in a pleading voice.

"Looking leads to wanting, and wanting leads to whining," Theo said making Seth laugh, but Ace was already whining.

"Please. We can just looooook."

Theo hung his head then nodded. "Fine. Since we're here, we might as well."

As they headed for the animal shelter, Seth had an inkling that Theo agreed because he didn't want their shopping trip to end on a bad note for Ace.

Going inside, they heard barking from a back room and a lady sitting at a desk greeted them. "Hello there. I'm Devina. You here to make some new friends?"

"I am," Ace told her as he craned his neck eager to have a look at the noisemakers in the back.

"We're just looking," Theo told her. "We're not ready to take any new friends home with us." That was as much for Ace's benefit as for the lady's.

She showed them into the back anyway, and Seth couldn't hold back. He went right over to the dogs to meet and greet every single one.

"You're worse than Ace," Theo told him.

That was true. Ace was hanging back and just looking at the animals. He was a smart kid, so maybe he took Theo's words to heart, and he didn't want to get too friendly with a doggy he couldn't have.

But as Ace was smiling at the dogs, a cat jumped up and hung onto the wire mesh of the enclosure she shared with two other cats. At first, she startled Ace, but then he went closer to have a good look at her.

"He's sniffing at me," Ace said as the cat did just that.

"She's getting to know you. That's Butterfly and she's a girl," Devina told him. The cat was white with dark patches including one on her back that sort of looked like a butterfly.

"Is that where her name comes from?" Seth asked Devina.

"You got that right," she told him.

"She won't stop looking at me. Hi, Butterfly," Ace whispered as the cat's green-eyed stare had him hypnotized.

"Thought he wanted a dog," Seth said to Theo.

"That cat has other ideas," Theo said while watching his little brother smiling at the cat and losing a staring contest to her.

"And what about you?" Seth wondered.

Theo slumped over and sighed. "I'll go find out what we need to do to take that cat home."

"For real?" Ace asked in a loud voice, startling the cat. "Theo, you said we couldn't afford to have a pet, not even a fish."

"Maybe we can have a pet. We have a house, and I have a job," Theo

said.

"Really?" Ace was amazed. "Everything is different here!"

"Isn't that the truth," Theo said with a quick glance at Seth, but then he went off with Devina and busied himself with paperwork.

Seth stayed with Ace who was buzzing with excitement and trying to share it with the climbing cat. Then Butterfly was allowed out and the first thing she did was climb all over Ace.

"She sure likes to climb. Watch out for her claws," Seth said.

"They've been trimmed," Devina said. "It might not look it, but Butterfly does know the difference between a person and a tree. She won't dig her claws into you."

"She's an outdoor cat?" Theo said.

"I want her to stay with me, not outside," Ace complained.

"She doesn't like to be cooped up, but she'll come back to you," Devina assured him, but Theo looked kind of worried. He must have been thinking the same thing Seth was – what if she didn't come back and Ace got his little heart broken?

They had to hit a pet store after that then deal with the crazy cat climbing all over the truck cabin as they drove back to Peach Tree. Petting would settle her down for a little bit but then she was off. Ace loved it but Theo grumbled the whole way.

"Don't let Butter climb on your brother while he's driving or we'll end up in a ditch," Seth told Ace.

"Don't start with that ditch stuff again," Theo warned him.

"Butter! That's what we're gonna call her," Ace decided.

Back at the house, Seth and Theo were busy unloading, but Ace was busy chasing the cat all around. Finding her way inside, the cat started going from room to room, exploring the house.

"Watch her, Ace. Make sure she doesn't do anything she shouldn't," Theo told him.

Ace was glad to follow the cat while Seth and Ace brought in the stuff they bought. They set up the table and chairs in the living room and two mattresses in Theo and Ace's room, but Seth dropped his mattress in the living room.

"We can leave this here for now, sit on it until it's time for bed," he said to Theo.

"Yeah!" Ace said and he jumped on the mattress.

"That's where we need to put a couch," Theo said, and it seemed like it bothered him that they didn't find one for a good price.

"These folding chairs are pretty comfortable," Seth said as he tested

out one of them.

"I was hoping for some real furniture, but these will do for now. And once I get real chairs, these can go out on the porch. After the porch is fixed." Theo sighed. He must have been thinking of everything they still needed to buy and that still needed fixing.

"Time to put away groceries and for me to cook something up," Seth said hoping to cheer him up. Theo went with him into the kitchen to help put things away. "The fridge works and that's good."

"Are you pointing out the bright side to me?" Theo asked him.

"I am. And you can pick what you want for dinner."

"You got those vegetables. We bought a pot. Make a stew," Theo said.

"And there are some biscuits left from the cafe. I'll heat them up in the skillet."

"OK. I have to go lecture Ace about responsibilities of pet ownership. Then I'll be back to help you with the cooking," Theo told him.

"You don't need to do that," Seth said.

"So you don't want help?" Theo said and raised an eyebrow like he was challenging him.

"Umm. You can help if you like," he said and turned away from that look Theo was giving him, like he could see inside him and knew just what Seth wanted. That was something Seth didn't know himself, but it was always nice to have Theo close by.

"The cat was trying to peel the stickers off Ace's new chest," Theo said when he came back.

"The stickers were the whole reason he wanted it."

Theo shut the kitchen door. "I'm keeping this door closed or the cat will be all over the counters. I'd rather not eat cat hair."

"She does like to climb. You're gonna have a hard time keeping her off the counters," Seth told him.

Theo groaned then he got down to helping Seth cook dinner. With the kitchen being small and Theo being so close, his help made Seth unsure and clumsy. In the end the food turned out all right, but when they sat down, Ace looked at the stew in his bowl and frowned.

"Seth, you put the potatoes in there with the vegetables. You should have made them into fries or mashed them up."

"Sorry, maybe next time," Seth said, but Theo wasn't having any of this complaining from his little brother.

"When you learn how to cook, you can make potatoes however you like. I wanted stew so that's what we are having."

Ace pouted at him. "I got Butter so it's OK." He ate the stew just fine though then ran off to play with the cat again.

After he was gone, Theo leaned back. "This was our first home

cooked meal here," he realized.

"A special occasion. We can crack open those chocolate chip cookies to celebrate," Seth said as he stacked the bowls and headed to the kitchen. "I'll sandwich them with peanut butter. I used to love that when I was a kid."

Seth got the cookies out and a plate, but as he was opening the peanut butter, Theo leaned on the counter next to him and said, "That sounds like something our mom would do. But she would do jam too. The sweeter the better." Theo's smile was sad, and Seth wasn't sure what he should do. Noticing that he was just staring at the cookies now, Theo nudged him with his elbow. "Go ahead. Ace will love them."

And he sure did. "You made a new food," he said to Seth before he ran off to see what his new cat was doing.

It turned out she had discovered the new mattresses and curled up on one of them. "She knows that one is mine," Ace said when Theo went in to put sheets on the two mattresses.

Seth took care of the dishes. He was almost done when Theo came in. "The sheets reminded me that we don't have a washer and dryer and now I'm reminded we don't have a dishwasher either."

"There's a laundromat in Peach Tree, and we didn't have a dishwasher at my grandpas other than me," Seth told him. "I think I saw power and water hookups by the kitchen door. There probably used to be a washer and dryer outside under that owning toward the back."

"Outside? Ouch."

"That's where we had them too," Seth told him with a shrug.

"You adjust to everything much better than I do," Theo said.

"You have more responsibilities. You have to think about Ace," Seth told him.

"And now a cat too," Theo said.

"You don't regret getting her, do you?"

"No. She makes this feel more like a home to Ace than any piece of furniture ever could."

"What are you doing with Ace tomorrow?" Seth asked since he knew Theo would be at work.

"He's going over to the Hayes's. I'm going to owe them so much."

"They'll need babysitting too," Seth pointed out. "And there's two boys and two dogs. It will even out in no time."

"I guess. I'll take you to the café, then drop Ace off then go to the inn since I start later. I won't be off in time to pick you up though," Theo told him.

"They might give me an extra shift," Seth said.

"Text me."

"I will," Seth said and smiled to himself. Most people texted all the time, but he didn't. Until now he had no phone or anyone to text. But to Theo, texting him wasn't going to mean anything. Seth looked forward to it anyway.

Like last night, they watched stuff on the iPad, but this time Ace was paying more attention to the cat than to the shows. But when it was close to his bedtime, he didn't forget to ask for his video game playing time.

"I thought the cat might have made you forget," Seth told him.

"No, Butter reminded me. She was doing this." Ace tapped at a spot on the floor. "And that reminded me."

"So that cat is already being a good friend to you," Seth said and stroked the cat's back as it came over to sniff Ace's PlayStation.

Later on she climbed on Ace while he was playing, but he didn't get mad at her when he couldn't play so good. At bedtime, he carried her to bed with him, and she cuddled next to him. Theo said goodnight and shut the lamp off, but Ace stopped him.

"It's too dark," Ace complained.

"The bird lamp we put in the other room isn't as bright as that one," Seth said to Theo. "We can put it in there."

"I can't take your light, Seth," Ace said.

Seth chuckled at how serious Ace was. "I don't mind."

"We'll just leave the door ajar and that will let light in from out here," Theo told him. "You have Butter, and I'll leave music playing in there. That should help too."

In the end, Ace was fine, and the next time Theo checked on him, he was asleep.

"That cat tuckered him out," Seth said as Theo came back to sit on the mattress they had left in the living room.

"It was a busy day, and I was proud of Ace. He didn't whine too much about all the things I couldn't afford to buy him," Theo said and he smiled. He was a loving big brother.

"He's a smart shopper and a good kid. Too bad that old man spoiled things, he was a nasty piece of work." It made Seth mad to think of how he spoke to Ace and Theo. And then that other guy trying to start a row. Seth wasn't sure he should say any more about that, but he just couldn't help himself. "You know I wouldn't let anyone mess with you and Ace. I'd fight for you."

"Why do you think you need to protect us?" Theo asked him, and his eyes took on that hard look that meant Seth might be in trouble.

Seth couldn't think of a good answer to get himself out of it. "I don't know. I just..."

"I can take care of us," Theo said, his voice sharp.

"I know. It's... It's just how I feel."

There was a long, thick silence between them then Theo asked, "Have you done a lot of fighting?"

"Not if I didn't have to, but I had a reputation for it anyway. When I was younger, when my mom and dad got themselves into trouble with the law, I got into fights at school. I was defending them from what the other kids were saying. Then my grandpa sat me down and told me they did the crime. They stole from the Henshaws, the richest family in town. By then, I had a reputation for starting fights and just being no good like my folks."

"I'm sorry. I appreciate that you want to defend us. I do," Theo said, but Seth knew he was dead set on handling everything himself. That's why he didn't like taking help from anybody.

Staring at his feet, Seth suddenly felt Theo bump him with his shoulder. "Let's watch something Ace isn't allowed to. Then tell him about it in the morning so he'll get mad at us."

"Just that first thing," Seth told him and Theo grinned at him.

"Oh, yeah, you're bad news, real scary guy," Theo said, making fun of him.

"You thought I was bad news," Seth told him.

Now Theo got serious. "Are you talking about...?"

"When you found me here," Seth said but he could tell he had made him think of something else. "So what are we watching? I'm up for anything. I mean watching anything."

He was babbling like a fool, but that was because he was pretty sure he and Theo were now both thinking about how Seth kissed him. When Theo started playing something on the iPad, Seth didn't even know what it was, but he forced his brain to pay attention only to what was on the screen and nothing else. Not Theo's face so close by, not the glow in his eyes, not his lips, that's for damn sure.

They watched some zombie action, and Seth could see why Ace wasn't allowed to. When they were done and Theo stood up, Seth finally took a proper breath. He felt like he hadn't been able to breathe the whole time they sat next to each other, like he was always measuring the inch or two of distance between them and telling himself not to lean in any closer.

"I'll drag this into the room now," he said standing up too and picking up the mattress.

"I'll help you." Theo grabbed the other end and they got the mattress

into the bedroom.

Seth turned on the bird lamp and started pulling on the sheets.

"Check out the luxury, a room with only an ugly lamp and a mattress in it," Theo said as he looked around.

"Everything I need. You won't be too crowded over there with you, Ace and a cat?" Seth asked him and pictured the cat climbing all over him as he slept.

Theo must have been thinking the same thing because he made a face. "I'll see, I guess. Good night."

"Good night," Seth said as he watched Theo go into the room he and Ace shared.

"Good night," Theo said again just before shutting the door to their bedroom.

Not bothering the shut his own door, Seth looked around. A good size room, a decent mattress and that lamp Ace picked out – Seth didn't need any more than that. He had brought hardly anything with him, but then he hardly had anything to bring.

Theo brought a life with him, and Seth just had some ratty, old clothes. Those tshirts Theo picked out for him were the best things he owned. He took them out and looked at them under the light of the lamp and he smiled. When he shoved them at Seth, the look in Theo's eyes was different. Hotter maybe. It wasn't there for long, but it made Seth want to kiss him even more than before. Not that he ever stopped wanting to. He burned to kiss him all the time.

Chapter 9

Finally sleeping on something other than the floor, Theo would have called that a good night's sleep if he didn't get woken up by the cat jumping on his legs. He was well into a string of expletives before he noticed Ace staring at him with bleary eyes.

"Your cat jumped on me," Theo said to him as he got to his feet and placed the cat next to Ace.

There was no point trying to sleep now. He might as well go and shower.

On his way, Theo stopped as he saw that Seth's bedroom door was open. He was on the mattress, turned on his side, one leg sticking out from under the covers. He was wearing sweatpants, so the sight shouldn't have done a thing for Theo.

But there was something about seeing him asleep, his lips parted, the same lips Theo had felt against his own. Damn it. Now he was going to be jerking off in the shower to nonstop fantasies about Seth.

Theo finished up his shower and got busy on his laptop while Seth and Ace took turns in the bathroom. His battery was running low and he was getting the charger from the bedroom when he heard noise coming from the kitchen. Going in to check, he found Seth holding Butter, and Ace laughing.

"What happened?" Theo asked as he poured himself some coffee.

"Butter jumped on Seth," Ace told him.

"The cat was on top of the kitchen cabinets and she jumped on me. Startled me," Seth said but he obviously wasn't holding a grudge since he was petting her.

"You get extra points for not swearing," Theo said to him.

"When Butter jumped on him in bed, Theo said bad words. It was funny," Ace snitched on him. "She jumped on me too, but I didn't say anything bad."

"I guess we'll need to watch out for her," Seth said but kept petting her like she was a perfectly good and well behaved cat. "She got us all up early, too, She's better than an alarm clock."

"I don't want to be woken up by twenty pounds of cat landing on me," Theo groused.

"She was just playing," Ace said, defending her. He took her from Seth and cuddled her protectively as he went into the living room.

"I'm making eggs. That OK?" Seth asked getting the carton out of the

fridge.

"Sure. This is almost like a lazy Sunday morning except we have to go to work," Theo said as he watched Seth crack eggs into a bowl and then whisk them with a fork.

"We have a little time before we have to go, and it's nice to start the day without a freezing cold shower," Seth said.

"Looking on the bright side again?" Theo asked him.

"I guess."

"But it is good to have hot water," Theo admitted. "I didn't even want to come out of the shower until I thought of the water bill." He made sure not to dwell on what he did in there and who he was thinking about.

"I didn't linger but I was sorely tempted," Seth said.

"That's because this house is pretty damn cold," Theo said as he noticed how nice it was to be next to the stove while Seth was heating up the pan for the eggs. It was also nice to be next to Seth, but Theo dragged himself away and opened his laptop on the kitchen counter and plugged it in to charge. "We have electricity but no heat. A guy is supposed to come and unclog the chimney on Monday. Then we can have a fire. I hope."

"Should I go get some firewood after breakfast?" Seth asked.

"You have an ax?"

Seth chuckled. "No, but with you giving me a lift, I have some time before I need to be at work. I can pick up loose branches just to start you off."

"That sounds more like a job for Ace."

"He can come too. You need to stay on the computer?" he asked since Theo was checking out some things on his laptop using the connection from his phone.

"No. I'll come too. I'll be done soon." Theo was looking into what kind of internet connection they could get that he could afford. He didn't like his choices.

"These eggs are going to be ready soon. You want to eat them standing up?" Seth asked.

"We have a table now," Theo said and shut the laptop so he could go get the plates. That reminded him of what Butter was up to earlier. "So you didn't curse when the cat jumped on you?"

"I try to do my cursing just in my own head, but I do slip up sometimes. My dad used to curse a blue streak, but my grandpa was real strict with me about it. I think he was afraid I would end up like my mom and dad. And all the stuff he heard about me made him think I was a bad seed."

Seth was turned away, and Theo didn't know what to say to him. He just stood there holding the plates. Then Seth turned to him, but he

didn't look upset. Was he just used to people thinking the worst about him? That thought hurt, so Theo told him. "It's a pity he misjudged you. But that not cursing thing is going to come in handy with Butter pouncing all over the place. Unlike me, you'll be setting a good example for Ace."

"Me a good example? I never thought I would hear those words," Seth said, and Theo wondered how much of what people said about him had gotten inside his head to influence how he thought about himself.

Seth was taking the food to the table when Ace pointed at him. "Oh, no. You have a big hole in your sweater."

And he did. Seth had on an olive green sweater with a hole under the arm.

"I'll fix that up with some needle and thread," Seth said.

Ace leaned over to whisper to Theo. "Quick. Let's tickle him before he fixes it."

"I should pretend I didn't hear that?" Seth asked.

"I plan to," Theo said.

Ace objected. "But he'll fix it."

As they were eating breakfast, Ace also fed Butter and told them about all the things she pounced on and did an impression of her purring. With the breakfast dishes done and drying by the sink and the cat closed up inside the house, the three of them went off to pick up wood.

"Look at Ace," Theo said as he and Seth followed him. "He already has an armful and we don't even know if we'll need firewood. If the fireplace guy finds a problem I can't afford to fix, this will all be for nothing."

Seth disagreed with that. "It's not a waste of time. We're clearing loose branches and such. This is your property after all. How far does it go anyway?"

"The well is about halfway to the property line that way," Theo said, pointing ahead of them.

"That's a good sized piece of land."

"It's not much good to us, just someplace for Ace to run around," Theo said with a shrug.

"And Butter once you let her out," Seth said pointedly.

"I'm worried Ace is going to lose that cat," Theo confessed.

"You don't want to keep her cooped up for good, do you?"

"No. That wouldn't be fair. She's already climbing the walls.

Literally."

"You worry like a big brother should," Seth told him with a smile but quickly turned to look ahead like maybe he didn't want Theo to think he was hitting on him.

And to be honest Theo doubted he was strong enough to turn down Seth a second time. Not that Seth was testing his resolve with anything except just being buff and flexing and bending all the damn time as they picked up stray branches. There were plenty of them lying around, but Seth still pointed to some dead trees he thought they should cut down for firewood.

When he pointed to one in particular, Ace objected. "Not that one. It looks like a robot." Then be showed them how exactly it looked like a robot.

"We don't even have a working fireplace, so don't worry about it," Theo told him. "Let's go back. We don't want Seth to be late for work."

Heading back to the house, Seth got a little ahead of him but Theo wasn't ogling him as much as he was trying to figure him out. Was he straight? Theo had been sure of it at first, but now he didn't know.

Wishful thinking was scrambling his judgment though he didn't know why it should. Seth wasn't the guy for him, and he wasn't even looking for anyone to hook up with right now. But as long as Seth was there, right in front of him, Theo couldn't get him out of his head.

At the inn, Theo had familiarized himself with the booking software they used, and now he was studying the seasonal patterns. The owner, Andy Brighton, had put together tons of data for him to study.

When he saw the file, the manager, Mr. Copeland, who turned out to be Mr. Brighton's fiancé, told Theo, "You don't need to memorize all that. Just look it over to get the gist."

As long as he wasn't busy, Theo figured he might as well study the data. There was a lot, tons of charts and analysis, but Theo didn't mind. It was better than listening to Dustin, his coworker, talking about all the bands he had ever been in. "I was in this band Doll Finger, and then it was Slime Production, then Declination, then..."

"Is there an end to this list?" Theo asked him.

"Ahh yeah. I mean some of these bands were like the same dudes just reshuffled around. You know how it is." Dustin nudged his shoulder, and it reminded him of doing that when he was cooking with Seth. Of course when it was Dustin, it was completely different.

"No," Theo said to Dustin though he actually had friends who were in bands.

"Like I used to be in this band The Sweaty Spoon. Then they went all heavy and changed the name to Mutagen Puss. No Y, just puss. A lot

of people make that mistake."

"These band names are starting to make me nauseous," Theo said then noticed that Mr. Copeland had stopped by reception and was now fixing Dustin with an icy glare.

"Dustin, what did I say about pushing your extracurricular activities during business hours?" Mr. Copeland said.

"But it's just Theo," Dustin said.

"Mr. Atkins is on front desk duty. Don't distract him or disgust him," Mr. Copeland told Dustin.

"Yes, Mr. C."

Mr. Copeland didn't like that. "Mr. C? And the rest?"

It took Dustin a minute before he figured out that he meant the rest of his name. "Mr. Copeland?" Then he added, "Sir."

"There you go," Mr. Copeland said.

As soon as he stepped away, Theo heard someone call out, "Baby on board."

"What was that?" he wondered.

"Just word going around that Lucy is here. That's Andy's kid," Dustin said.

That reminded Theo that everyone there called the owner by his first name, so Theo should too. "That's a big deal with Andy's kid?"

"This whole place is like a Lucy fan club. The only thing bigger is when Helen brings in her homemade doughnuts. Then we have a stampede. I've been trampled to death a few times," Dustin claimed as Theo gave him the side-eye.

He was going to go back to looking over the data when he saw Andy come in carrying a baby and Mr. Copeland went over to greet them and to take the baby from him.

"Let's go meet Mr. Atkins. He's our newest employee and he's very diligent," Copeland said. "He's diving pretty deep into your daddy's charts and graphs even though I told him he didn't have to."

"Why would you tell him that?" Andy asked him.

"For his sanity," Mr. Copeland said over his shoulder and gave his fiancé a smirk.

He then brought the baby over and introduced her to Theo. The baby was cute, but the whole time, Theo was thinking of Ace as a baby, their dad holding his tiny hand, kissing each one of his chubby, little fingers.

Once when he was holding Ace and gazing at him, their dad told Theo, "When I look into his eyes, it's like I can see everything, all the answers to all the questions in the universe."

Theo had leaned over to see for himself. All he saw was Ace drooling and staring, but it was still nice.

As he was thinking about Ace, Theo couldn't help worrying about

how he was going to make sure their aunt didn't get him back. She did kick them out, so it's not like she cared. His best bet was that she would simply give up on Ace.

Their bosses moved off with the baby and Theo got a text from Seth letting him know he picked up an extra half shift. For no good reason, seeing the text made him smile.

"Girlfriend text," Dustin said knowingly while pointing at Theo's face.

"Wrong."

Dustin wouldn't accept that. "You can't fool me. No one smiles like that because they got a text from grandma. It's a girly girl."

"I'm gay," Theo informed him.

He realized his mistake only when Dustin said, "Boyfriend. Same difference."

"No. Just a friend... or something." Theo didn't know if they were friends. Were they?

"Got it. Friend with benefits. But I was still in the ballpark," Dustin insisted.

Theo was about to deny that by saying Seth was just a guy he was living with, but he decided to stop before he dug himself in any deeper. Maybe he could ask Dustin to tell him more about his band experience. But now Theo was picturing Seth the way he saw him asleep that morning, and realizing that he never jerked off while thinking about anyone else any more.

Chapter 10

The café got busy and Seth ended up with a few extra hours and some good tips. Done with work at the same time as Hannah, he stepped out in front of the café with her. Stopping for a bit, he wondered if he should spend some time in town since Theo and Ace wouldn't be home yet. Walking would take him a while so they might get there right when he did, or even pick him up on the way if he got lucky.

"I thought you had that noisy old truck," Hannah said looking around. "I don't see it."

"Theo has it at the inn," Seth told her.

"I'll drive you over and you can get it," she offered.

Seth shook his head. "Oh, no. I don't want to bother him. But thanks anyway. I'm just going to walk to the house."

"Walk? More like let Theo walk all over you," she said. "You're supposed to share that old wreck, aren't you?"

Seth couldn't believe she was saying that. "He drove me to work."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll give you a ride to the house."

"You don't have to do that. I'm alright walking."

"I already said I was doing it. I can pick up Shawn to go over so he and Ace can hang out," she said, inviting herself over.

"They won't be at house yet. But I'll text." Happy to have an excuse to text Theo, Seth told him what was up then passed the word to Hannah. "Theo is just finishing up then he'll be getting Ace. He offered to get me too, but I told him I have a ride." Seth told Hannah so she'd know she had the wrong idea about Theo.

"Sounds like they might be at the house by the time I get Shawn and we get there."

Seth didn't think so, but it did take her a while. Shawn wasn't eager to go for a visit, and Hannah wanted to change.

"Ace is just a little kid," Shawn complained while the two of them waited for Hannah in front of their house.

"So?" Seth said and watched the boy shrink back. Seth didn't want him putting Ace down, but he didn't want to scare him either. Maybe he was giving people mean looks without realizing it. Theo and Ace never showed any sign of it, but that guy at the thrift store did.

By the time they were parking in front of the house, Theo and Ace still weren't back.

"There isn't even a proper dirt driveway," Hannah complained as she got out of her mother's car.

"It's just a bit overgrown," Seth said then he saw Shawn going over to the porch steps. "Better stay off the porch. It still needs to be fixed."

Looking bored and annoyed, Shawn only sat down on the steps and kept playing a game on his phone like he had done the whole drive over.

"Can we go inside?" Hannah asked since Seth didn't invite them in.

"Sorry. There's no key for that front door and I can't get you in through the side either. I don't have a key," Seth told her.

"You don't have a key?" Hannah said and Seth could tell she was gearing up to gripe about Theo again.

"It's padlocked. I don't even know how many keys there are," Seth told her.

"Two. They come with two," Hannah said.

"Theo is doing me a favor letting me stay here, you know," Seth told her.

"So you don't feel you're entitled to a key?"

"No, I don't," Seth told her straight out, but she only shook her head. "I have no cause for complaint, and I should know best."

"Sorry for busting your chops. I just like to speak my mind." It was a halfhearted apology, but Seth still accepted it.

"I can take it," he said.

"You don't talk much. That leaves plenty of talk time for me. Maybe too much," she said.

That made him think of Theo and how Seth liked to hear him talk, which he didn't do nearly enough. But even when they weren't talking, whatever Theo was doing, Seth wanted to be helping him with it. Did he want to be friends with him that bad? Or...

After they hung out for a while, they heard the truck approaching well before they saw it. "Here comes that awful truck," Hannah said.

There she was starting up again. "It runs," Seth told her.

"It's ready for the junk yard," Hannah said as the truck came into view.

"It's a working truck," Seth pointed out.

As soon as the truck came to a stop, Ace jumped out and ran over, asking Shawn, "Did you see Butter?"

Shawn was confused. "Butter?"

"My cat!" Ace told him.

"We haven't been inside," Seth said and watched as Theo got out of the truck slowly.

For some reason, he was eyeing Hannah and didn't look happy to see her. Seth did text to ask if it was OK that she and Shawn were coming over, but now he wondered if Theo disliked her for some reason or if

he didn't want him bringing guests over.

Now that he was there, Theo unlocked the side door and they all went inside.

"You all are camping out here," Hannah said on seeing the lawn chairs in the living room.

Theo objected, "We're living here."

"Furniture don't grow on trees," Seth told her.

"Was that supposed to be funny?" Theo asked him.

"Um, no," Seth said and then realized what he meant.

Ace was still in the kitchen with Butter and Shawn when Seth heard him say, "We like our house!"

That meant Shawn must have said something bad about the house too. They went into the kitchen where Ace was holding Butter and furrowing at Shawn.

"OK. Sorry," Shawn said and rolled his eyes a lot like his sister did. Then he noticed that Ace hadn't let him off the hook yet. "Why you still looking at me like that?"

"Try saying sorry like you mean it," Hannah told him even though they were two of a kind.

Theo didn't wait for a sincere apology, he just told Ace. "You can take Butter outside but watch that she doesn't get lost."

"I was going to cook up something," Sean said to Theo as they followed Hannah and the kids out the door.

"We still have the stew. You can just go ahead and hang out with Hannah," Theo said but the look in his eyes was kind of mean.

As they went out front, Seth was surprised to see a big, black SUV pulling up. "What's this now?"

"That's the handyman who was here before, Mitch McEvers, but I don't know why he's here now," Theo said.

"Oh, I might know," Hannah said. "I texted Rico about your padlock situation."

"How is that any of your business?" Theo asked her.

"I was just gossiping, and gossip is everybody's business," Hannah claimed.

That made no sense to Theo or anybody. "What?"

"Don't worry about me. You have her to deal with now," Hannah said and nodded her head in the direction of the little blond girl who jumped out of the SUV and was now running over yelling. "Ace!"

"That's Mitch's daughter, Sammy," Theo said to Seth.

Sammy was about four maybe but not shy around bigger kids. She stopped right in front of Ace and stared up at him like she would burn holes through him.

"What?" Ace asked her.

She jumped a few times in front of him then she yelled. "The kitty!"

"Yeah. I texted about your cat too," Hannah said.

Theo glared at Hannah then at Seth, who raised his hands in surrender. Hannah walked away to text some more and Seth waited with Theo for this Mitch guy.

He was tall, built, and dead serious, and when he heard that Theo didn't know he was coming over, he apologized. "Sorry. I didn't know you weren't consulted. But these locks are free. I took them off a house west of Ashbury. They're perfectly good."

"They're better than a padlock," Seth said and made Theo glare at him again.

"I'll put them in free of charge, one for the front door another for the side door," Mitch said.

"I can't keep taking favors," Theo told him.

"Sure you can," Mitch told him. "When I came to Peach Tree with Sammy, I was in a tight spot. I got a helping hand, so there's no reason you can't. Actually you can return the favor right now and watch Sammy for me while I'm working and make sure she stays off that porch."

"That's not much of a favor," Theo said.

Mitch lowered his head and fixed Theo with a hard stare. "Sammy is my only, precious child," Mitch said with an intensity that was downright scary.

Theo sighed and admitted defeat. "All right. We'll watch her."

Now Mitch smiled in triumph and got to work.

"And I thought you could give a mean look," Seth said to Theo as they walked away to see what the kids were up to.

"You're the one who looks scary," Theo told him.

"Either way, Mitch wins," Seth said and they went over to where the kids were standing with Hannah and looking up at a tree. Butter was sitting on a branch and not showing any sign of coming down.

"She's not stuck, is she?" Theo asked.

"She's an outdoor cat. They know how to climb down," Seth told him.

"So it's everyone crowding her. That's why she won't come down," Theo concluded.

The two of them stood back and Seth looked over at Theo. He didn't look happy, that was for sure. Seth knew Theo didn't like people butting into his business, and here it was happening again and all because he brought Hannah over.

"You mad at me?" Seth asked.

Theo didn't answer, didn't even look at him.

Seth started to apologize. "Damn. I'm..."

Theo cut him off. "Ask me later."

Butter wasn't budging from that branch though Ace was yelling up at her, trying to get her down. "Come on! Come here! Come on so Sammy can see you and pet you."

"Cats don't like yelling," Sammy told him. "You have to be like this." To show him, she stood still while staring up at Butter. And hell if that cat didn't climb down to a branch right above Sammy's head so she could get nose to nose with the little girl. But then Butter pounced and jumped on her shoulders.

Seth went forward but Sammy was laughing as the cat walked from her shoulders to Ace's.

"That cat, I swear," Seth said relieved that Butter didn't scare Sammy.

"You were ready to go in for the rescue," Hannah accused him.

"She's so little. I thought Butter might have scared her."

Sammy heard him and called out to correct him, "Butterfly!"

"We call her Butter," Ace told her.

"But you said her name is Butterfly. Butterfly is a good name," Sammy said.

"Your full name isn't Sammy, you know," Hannah said.

"I know," Sammy said. "But Butter is food."

"And Sammy is a sandwich," Shawn said.

"I am not a sammich," Sammy told him with a frown.

"We can call her Butterfly sometimes so she doesn't forget," Ace said to try and make peace.

"Is that good enough for you, Miss Bossy Pants?" Hannah asked Sammy.

"I'm not bossy pants," Sammy told her then she turned to Ace with pleading eyes. "You don't think I'm bossy pants, do you, Ace?"

Ace took a minute to come out with a long, drawn out "Noooo" that could only have a question mark at the end of it, but Sammy just nodded and smiled, satisfied.

"You're not gonna ask me?" Shawn said to her.

Sammy shook her head. "You're not Ace."

"You can't argue with that," his sister informed him.

"What's so special about him?" Shawn asked looking sideways at Ace who was petting Butter.

Sammy was ready with an answer. "Ace has a kitty and he has nice hair."

"My aunt said I should cut it off," Ace told her.

"No, you should never cut it," Sammy said to him.

"Never?" Ace said.

"Never," she said very seriously.

"I should get the kids a snack, right?" Seth asked Theo. "We have those cookies. Maybe milk too?"

"I'll get it. You can..."

Seth knew Theo was going to tell him to hang out with Hannah, so he stopped him. "No. I got it." He wanted to leave Theo and Hannah to talk, maybe get their issues sorted.

Balancing three glasses of milk and the bag of cookies, Seth came back out just in time to hear Hannah saying, "Maybe I'm into the strong and silent type."

Seth glanced at Theo, and saw he was glaring at him like he wanted to kill him. What the hell was going on now?

Theo was strong and silent for sure. Was Hannah hitting on him? Seth started to wonder if that was why she wanted to come over. She did change before they came, and she did say Theo was a hottie. And being hard on Theo might have been her way of covering up what she was up to.

Glad to be away from them, Seth delivered the snack to the kids on the front porch steps.

"My brother, Theo, works at the Stone Creek Inn," Ace was saying to the other kids and sounding very proud.

Sammy gasped and ran over to Theo to ask him, "Did you see the baby, baby Lucy?"

"I did," Theo said.

Now the little girl was even more fired up. "Did you hold her hand like this?" She took Theo's fingers in her little hand to show him.

Theo laughed. "No."

"You have to. Then you'll be friends with the baby," Sammy told him and then ran away to go back to tell Ace about the baby and how to make friends with her.

"That's my Pink Tornado for you," Mitch said coming over and looking after Sammy with a loving smile. It turned out that he was done with the locks and he handed Theo the keys.

He and Sammy left soon after that and then Hannah and Shawn did too. Now it was up to Ace and Theo to try and get Butter back inside while Seth took the glasses and the almost empty cookie bag to the kitchen.

When they didn't come back, Seth took one of the cat treats out to them. That got Butter to come inside and Seth started heating up dinner.

"I feel like I can breathe easier with all of them gone," Seth confessed.

"Is that right?" Theo asked like he didn't believe him. He was on his laptop but Seth didn't think he was interrupting him.

Theo was mad at him about Hannah and maybe for Mitch coming here too. If it bothered Theo that Hannah hit on him, it didn't sit right with Seth either. Telling himself that Theo was gay and she wouldn't get anywhere with him only made him feel a little better.

But it shouldn't bother Seth at all if Theo got hit on. Except it was like when Seth kissed him. He just couldn't help this thing inside him that wanted to warn everybody to keep their damn hands off Theo.

All through dinner, Ace was the one doing most of the talking. Then they all took their dishes to the kitchen and Seth started washing them.

"I'll do that," Theo told him.

"I'm pitching in for you letting me stay here, remember," Seth said.

"I... Fine," Theo said just as Ace came in with his glass.

"I finished my juice."

"Good for you. You got to show off Butter to two of your friends. Did you have a good time?" Seth said to Ace but with a glance at Theo's back as he left.

"Yeah. Sammy is a little kid, but she knows about cats. But Shawn knows lots about video games. And Sammy liked my hair," Ace said with a grin.

"You have cool hair."

"You like it too?" Ace said with an even bigger smile.

"Sure do. But your aunt didn't?" Seth said remembering what Ace said.

"Aunt Cindy wanted to cut it, but I didn't let her. I said, 'No. I want hair like Theo.' She said Theo looked like a thug. Ha! Theo is a nerd, and he looks like a nerd. And I said, 'No no no!'"

"You disobeyed her?" Seth was surprised.

"Theo said I could. He said not to listen if Aunt Cindy tells me anything that's wrong. That she wasn't like our mom even if she looked like her."

"I see," Seth told him. "Then you must have done right."

As long as Ace was up, things weren't too bad. He drew Theo out of his bad mood. But once Ace was in bed with Butter curled up next to

him, Theo went silent and Seth was on pins and needles. He wanted to talk to Theo about what happened with Hannah that got him so mad, but he wasn't brave enough to jump right in.

He started talking about Ace instead. "Ace was telling me how he didn't let his aunt cut his hair."

"So?" Theo was looking at the iPad, but Seth was sure it was only to keep something between them.

"Ace said he wanted to be like you, and well, he defied his aunt. I've never seen him defy you much."

"Ace is a good kid."

That was something Seth already knew. "He is, so I figured if you told Ace to disobey her that meant she couldn't be trusted."

For a minute Theo looked like he was going to tell him to mind his own business but then he just nodded. "No, she couldn't be trusted. We were only money to her. She got paid by the state as a foster parent."

"But wasn't she family?" Seth said. His grandfather took care of him and nobody paid him one cent for it, not even his mom and dad.

"She is our mom's sister. That's why we got placed with her, but she didn't take us in for free," Theo said.

"And you're sure she didn't just need help paying the bills?"

"I know how she treated us and I know how quickly she kicked me out when I turned eighteen. And that wasn't even the worst of it, but I don't want to get into that." Now Theo clammed up and Seth wasn't going to push him any further, not on that subject anyway.

"You said to ask you later if you're mad at me," he reminded Theo and watched his expression change. He was already looking gloomy, but now he was glaring at Seth.

"I don't have any right to be mad, do I? But you two certainly got friendly."

"Me and... Hannah?" Theo said though he knew that had to be what he meant.

"Who else?"

"I guess we did. She's kind of pushy but she means well." Seth wasn't happy that she hit on Theo, but he didn't have a right to hold a grudge. But he did wonder if Hannah reminded Theo of that other girl who was after him.

"How did she get on your bad side? I know you talked to her for a bit. Did she...? I mean..." Seth didn't want to sound like he was prying. It wasn't his business, but Theo told him some of what she said anyway.

"She warned me to act right where you were concerned."

"She what? I told her to lay off about that." What the hell was that girl thinking?

"She was singing your praises, telling me I could stand to be nicer to you," Theo said.

"I'm sorry. I think you treat me just fine. She just got it all wrong." Now Seth was confused. Maybe Hannah wasn't hitting on Theo after all, and he had it wrong.

"She was just sticking up for you. That's nice, isn't it?" Theo said but his eyes didn't match his words.

"It's... It was wrong of her, and I'm sorry. But she really isn't so bad."

"Right," Theo said like Seth didn't even come close to convincing him. "So now you're defending her like she was defending you from me. It's kind of sweet."

"She has her good points."

"I bet." Theo's mouth twisted.

He was mad, and Seth didn't know what to do.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just being a dick," Theo said through gritted teeth.

Seth stared at him. "You're mad at me." It was the truth. He could see it.

"I don't have any right to be. I'm irritated, maybe a little irrational, but that's my problem and I'll get over it." With that Theo opened his laptop and its screen went up between them.

Seth couldn't understand him. Did Theo think he was lying and he had complained to Hannah about him? Maybe he thought Seth was ungrateful. Theo didn't start out having a high opinion of him, but it hurt to lose the friendly feeling that was building between them.

Chapter 11

Seth went to bed first and Theo expected to feel some relief when he was gone, but he actually felt worse without him there. Knowing he acted like a jealous fool didn't help.

But the way Hannah acted was worse. He couldn't bring himself to talk to Seth about everything she said, but she did a lot more than stick up for him. She was letting him know Seth was her territory, talking about him like he was hers for the taking and Theo should just back the hell off.

He couldn't believe he let Hannah get to him like that. But Theo had half convinced himself that Seth was gay. He still might be bi, but the way he went for Hannah after kissing him, Theo didn't care what he was. That didn't mean he could stop thinking about him, even fantasizing about him, except images of him with Hannah would intrude.

Knowing he couldn't sleep, Theo didn't even bother going to the bedroom he shared with Ace. He tried watching some of the shows he had saved so he wouldn't waste his data. He did some texting with friends who were up late, but nothing could distract him from Seth.

Straying from the screen, his eyes would focus on the short hallway leading to the bedrooms and he would wonder if Seth's door stood open like it did before, if he might be awake.

Finally he had enough of wondering and he got up and went over there.

Yes, Seth's door was open. As soon as Theo stopped in his doorway, he sat up.

Not knowing what else to say, Theo stated the obvious, "Not asleep."

"I wasn't sleepy. I just wanted to give you some time to yourself. But you're here." Seth's voice was low, inviting Theo to come closer while he sat as if waiting for him to come in.

No, it was the need building up in him that made Theo go inside. Shutting the door of Seth's room, he found himself in darkness then blinked as the lamp came on.

"I like looking at you," Seth said.

Damn, how was he supposed to turn back now? How was he supposed to walk out? He couldn't, not when Seth was looking up at him, searching his eyes, still waiting while Theo hung back by the door.

"I have a feeling that in the morning I won't know if you were really here," Seth whispered.

"Want me to make you remember it?" Theo asked him.

"Yes."

The simple answer sent Theo closer, and he climbed on the mattress with his knees on either side of Seth's legs. Grabbing him by the arms, Theo pulled him in. He was seeking Seth's warmth as he leaned in, grazing his neck with his teeth, licking and then sucking at his pulse point.

Already, Seth was breathing so hard, and all Theo did was put his arms around him and kiss his neck. Seth wasn't the only one. Theo's heart was racing.

Oh God, he wanted more of this, more of Seth's body firm, muscular, shuddering while Theo's lips grazed the cords of his neck.

"Theo," Seth gasped into his ear.

Then Seth's arms were around him but just barely like he was afraid to hold him. One hand stroked his hair, the other skimmed over his lower back.

"Oh Theo," he said again, his voice shaky, breath hot.

It didn't feel like Theo thought it would. Seth's hands on him were gentle, touching him wherever he could but not like he was demanding anything. It didn't feel like Seth was trying to rush him to do anything more, but like he would be fine if this was all they did, just hung onto each other, pressed close, breathing hard.

But would Theo be all right with it? He would not. Even if his reasons for coming in here were stupid – to claim Seth, show him he was better than any girl. Now he just needed Seth, needed to taste him, have him, make him come.

"Don't you make a sound," he told Seth and pushed him down on the mattress.

This was dumb, such a bad idea. He shouldn't be doing it. But there he was, pushing Seth's sweatshirt up so he could grope his chest and lower his face to graze his nipples with his teeth.

Hissing, Seth arched off the mattress, but his hands held Theo in place. It's not like Theo was going anywhere. Drunk on the feel of him, the warmth of his skin, Theo kissed lower. All thoughts left this head as his mouth mapped the ridges of his abs.

Pushing down his sweatpants, he heard Seth let out a throaty, choked off sound and felt his big, hard cock pop free. Fuck, this was too much.

Theo rubbed the palm of his hand lightly from balls to tip and groaned while Seth cursed.

"I thought you didn't swear," Theo teased him.

"Can't... help it," he panted, his eyes hooded as he stared at Theo.

"You better. You need to stay quiet," Theo warned him then leaned down to lick the underside of his shaft. Whatever sound Seth was

going to make turned into him gritting his teeth and throwing his head back.

Theo's tongue traced the veins then licked around the head. More suppressed sounds rumbled through Seth's chest, but he couldn't hold back a moan when Theo's lips wrapped around the head of his cock.

Theo stopped and moved up to shut him up, to kiss him. Seth moaned into his mouth, then they both did. Now Theo had to have his cock again, and he warned Seth. "Stay quiet. I mean it."

Taking hold of the base of his cock, Theo let it slide over his tongue, to the back of his throat but he had to stop there and work the rest with his hand. He pulled off when Seth whole body stiffened under him.

"Too soon," Theo told him as he stroked him with his hand very lightly.

Seth nodded and let out a shaky breath. It looked like he wasn't in a rush to come either. Theo got back to it, and then heard Seth pleading, "Please, not yet."

Theo eased off, but it still felt like he was close. So close.

The next time Theo picked up speed and sucked until he had Seth coming, groaning between gritted teeth. Theo licked and swallowed, and Seth collapsed with his hand in Theo's hair.

When Theo tried to get up to leave, Seth stopped him. "No. You," he said, and Theo wondered if he was just trying to pay him back.

If that's what it was, he was pretty determined. He rushed to free Theo's cock, but when Seth tried to go down on him, Theo didn't let him.

"Just use your hand," he gasped. Seth gripped him and Theo thrust into his hand. He felt Seth's arm go around his back. The hard muscles felt good as Seth pumped his cock.

Theo didn't bother holding off, just came in Seth's hand with Seth's arm around him, his face buried in his hair, and his taste fresh on his tongue.

"Theo. Oh, damn, damn," Seth said like he was the one who was coming.

Then he shocked the hell out of Theo by bringing his hand up to his mouth and licking it. "Mmm, you taste good. You should have let me..."

"I was in a rush," Theo lied. In truth, he didn't want a halfhearted blowjob or worse disgust. But maybe it wouldn't have gone like that. Maybe Seth would have liked it. He did lick up his come.

"We need to clean up," Theo said to him and Seth looked around then dumped out his pillow from the pillowcase. He offered the pillowcase to Theo without first wiping his hand with it.

"Thanks," Theo told him. "Now I owe you a pillowcase."

Seth smiled. "I'm good," he said, so Theo took his hand and wiped it for him.

The whole time Seth stared into his eyes and didn't look away.

"You're not used to people taking care of you, are you?" Theo said, but he wasn't really asking. He already knew it was true.

Chapter 12

Last night, that was such an incredible thing. It had to be something Seth only dreamed. But he could still feel everything – holding Theo, touching him, but Theo's mouth more than anything. But Seth would have killed to taste his cock.

That could only mean he had to be gay. Dumb of him not to figure it out sooner, but he couldn't remember ever feeling anything for any guy other than Theo. And Theo was like the sun burning him up, blinding him.

Then last night he came to his room. Something so good had to be a dream.

His morning was all confused because of it even as he drove Ace to school and Theo to work. At the café, Seth had to focus hard not to mess up. He didn't know how much longer he would have the job, so he had to get good tips.

A favorite with the customers was Wyatt's husband, Sam. Seth was surprised to find out who he was. Sam waited tables and took over for the cook sometimes. He was good at everything but you wouldn't know it. Sam was quiet, serious, and modest to a fault, very different from that Wyatt.

That reminded Seth of how Theo told him that the two of them were married right before he told him he was gay. And then Seth lost his damn mind. But last night...

No. He had to stop thinking about that and do his job.

Seth didn't finish work in time to pick up Ace, but he went to get Theo at the inn later. As soon as Theo climbed in next to him, Seth told him what happened when he was leaving the café. "This lady came up to me because of the truck and asked me to haul away some debris. They demolished a shed. That Mr. Miller used to do that sort of thing. She's paying so I thought I might do it. What do you say?"

"Where do you haul it?" Theo asked looking up from his phone. He must have been texting with Wyatt to let him know they were on their way to pick up Ace.

"There's a dump and a scrap yard."

"You want help?" Theo asked. "I might want to visit the scrap yard. See what they have."

"Sure. You want some wood for the porch?" Seth guessed.

"Either that or I'll have to put some yellow tape around it," Theo said.

"We can take Ace with us, right?"

"He'll want to help," Theo said sourly, but Seth smiled.

"We'll find something for him to do."

It turned out that Ace wasn't so eager to go with them. When they arrived in front of the Hayes house, another car was there and a little kid was talking to Ace and the Hayes boys.

Wyatt introduced them to the little boy whose name was Danny. It turned out he had just met Ace too. Danny peered up at him worriedly. "I'm three." He showed Ace how much that was with his fingers. "Are you too big to be friends with a little kid like me?"

Ace didn't even have to think about it. "I'm not too big, and you're not too little. We can be friends."

Danny looked so happy then he asked. "Do you want to be friends with Lenny too?"

"Sure," Ace said and then asked. "Who's Lenny?"

"My dog." The little boy pointed behind them to a blond guy with green eyes who was carrying a tiny dog.

Now Ace answered even more eagerly. "I definitely want to be friends with him."

That made little Danny smile and he went over to get the dog.

"He's done his business," the guy said.

Wyatt introduced him too. His name was Rob, but they didn't get to find out if he was the little boy's dad. In the middle of the introductions, the kids all started to talk about how they were going to split up into teams and play soccer with all the dogs. It was real complicated, and Ace decided to stick around and be on a team with little Danny.

Theo agreed, not that the kids were giving him much choice. As he and Seth drove off, Theo was shaking his head like it was all too much for him to take.

"I'm going to owe Wyatt a kidney. How does he do it?" Theo said.

"He was having fun with it, talking about being a referee and rubbing his hands together," Seth said. "But we lost our little helper. Hauling junk just can't compare to playing soccer with dogs, I guess."

After they went to the house to change, Seth drove to the lady's house and she took them out back where the shed used to be. Working together, loading the debris into the back of the truck, they were done in good time and had a little extra money in their pockets.

Working next to Theo was quite a distraction though. Seth wanted to go over to him all the time to touch him and lick the sweat off his

skin. He had to shake himself out of it and wonder at all these new feelings.

The scrap yard was on the outskirts of Ashbury, with train tracks running just east of it. Seeing all the piles of stuff, Theo looked kind of intimidated, but it was all pretty well organized. Seth didn't think they would have any trouble finding what they needed.

But first, the guy in charge of the scrap yard looked over what they had, picked out what was usable and paid a little bit of money for it. The rotten and rusted stuff would go to the dump, but before going to the dump, they looked for wood for the porch.

Seeing some pieces of wood that had been fitted together, Seth showed them to Theo. "A picnic table would be just the thing. This could be the top of it. Eating outside when the weather is nice, can't you just see it?"

"I can but I don't know if I can build one. I guess it's another thing I can look up online."

"I can help you put it together," Seth volunteered. "It's going to be a big one, but that's not a bad thing for when you have people over."

They ended up with a good amount of wood for the table and for the porch that didn't cost too much. "I just spent more than we made," Theo said.

"Easy come, easy go," Seth said with a shrug, but he wasn't happy that Theo didn't let him pitch in with some of his own money.

Loading the wood into the back of the old truck, Seth noticed two guys in a big, new truck who looked like they were making fun of them. He heard one of them call out, "nice ride" as he snickered. After those guys drove away, Seth told Theo, "I think those guys were laughing at this old truck."

"Who cares?"

"It doesn't bother you?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," Theo said. "It's not like I'm going to use it to pick up guys."

Seth felt a sharp stab of jealousy at that. "Are you gonna be...? I mean..." He couldn't get the words out. He didn't want to know that Theo might want to be with other guys.

"Are you worried I'm going to be bringing guys home to fuck?" Theo asked him, his eyes hard.

"No. I was just... I don't know." It hurt to think of Theo with anybody else, but he had no real claim on him.

What if he did? What if he could claim Theo for his own? They were

sitting inside the truck when Seth reached for him, angled his face and kissed him. He meant to do it gently, like a question, but the turmoil inside him wouldn't let him. It made the kiss deeper, it made his hands restless, grabbing for Theo, needing the feel of his skin, his cock.

It didn't happen right away, but when Seth started rubbing Theo's cock through his jeans, Theo pushed him off. "Back it up. You think because I did it once, I'll service you all the time?" His voice was a hoarse whisper, the expression in his eyes sad and serious. "Is that what this is?" he was asking like someone who didn't really want to know the answer because he was dreading it.

"No, I..."

"I'm not your slut," Theo said.

"I don't think that. I just..." He got jealous. That was the truth. Jealous of some guy Theo might want instead of him. But how could he say that?

"Let's just go," Theo said.

As they got on the road, he glared ahead and didn't say a word, and Seth didn't know how to explain himself. It could be that what they did was just a one off, and Theo didn't want it to ever happen again. Seth hated to think that was true, that he would never be allowed to touch him again.

To get to the dump, they drove along the train tracks. Smoky, gray clouds were racing across the sky, and Seth wondered if bad weather was on the way.

When they got to the dump, Theo didn't get out of the truck. He just sat there, and Seth worried that he upset him real bad and now Theo didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"Theo, I'm..."

Theo cut him off. "I've already been through this once with someone I thought was my friend. As soon as he found out I was gay, he turned all grabby."

So that's why. But Theo had him all wrong. Or did he? Seth did pounce on him the very second he found out. Maybe there wasn't any difference.

"When you told me, I did think of you in a way that got me all stirred up," Seth told him truthfully. "And then with what happened last night, I got carried away. I won't get grabby again."

"Last night was my doing. I shouldn't blame you for getting the wrong idea." Theo opened the truck door, got out, and they got to work unloading the stuff that was too far gone to be of use.

Once that was done, Seth stopped to stare at a plastic Christmas tree on top of a garbage pile. The tree was decorated with all sorts of garbage and topped with a broken clock. Stopping next to him, Theo saw it too.

"I'm taking a picture of that for Ace." Theo stepped away to get a better angle on it.

That's when Seth noticed that someone had parked so that a van ended up trapped between them and the truck. Seth rushed off to move the truck, but as he got there, a lady climbed out from the side of the van and started yelling angrily.

"Is this yours? Is this your truck? You move this piece of junk. You move it right now."

That's exactly what Seth was about to do. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I'll move it," he said but she wasn't satisfied.

"Damn right you will, blocking me in! You got brain damage or something, you feeble minded, good-for-nothing..."

She got no further than that as Theo appeared right behind her. He came in hot, growling at her, "What is going on here? Why the hell are you speaking to him like that?"

She tried to say something, but Theo didn't let her.

"No! You are done being rude and abusive. He didn't block you. That other car blocked you. But since we're going now, problem solved!" He pulled the passenger side door open but waited for Seth to get in first and shut his door. Getting in himself, Theo glared at the woman the whole time.

Seth got them on the road, and after a minute he heard Theo sigh. "Seth, why were you apologizing to her when you didn't do anything wrong?"

"Habit?" He had accepted that he was always in the wrong as far as the whole world was concerned.

Theo sighed again. "Sorry I snapped at you before."

"Was it because you were wishing you could take back what we did?" Seth asked.

"No. I don't want to take it back. I just don't want you getting the wrong idea about me."

"Like that you're a slut? I don't think that. I would never think anything bad about you. I just don't know how to act around you now," Seth admitted but that only made Theo's expression turn even more gloomy.

By the time they picked up Ace, a light sprinkle of rain started. Theo told them that he got a text that the chimney had been cleared and they could use the fireplace. Ace was happy about that and full of

stories about his soccer game with the dogs.

"That Lenny is a funny little dog," Ace said then he turned more thoughtful. "I was playing with three dogs today. You think Butter is gonna be jealous?" He looked from Seth to Theo for the answer.

"You're toast," Theo told him with a straight face and Ace gasped.

"Just give her some extra attention to make it up to her, and she'll forgive you," Seth told him.

Ace nodded and huffed while shooting a frown at his big brother.

A light but steady rain was falling when they arrived at the house, so they had to rush to unload the wood they got at the scrap yard. Ace went inside to make sure Butter didn't get mad at him, and Seth and Theo stacked the wood on the porch to keep it out of the rain.

They were a little wet and chilled when they went in. Seth was going to go to his room to change, but Theo stopped him.

"You can change into this." Theo handed him a big box that had the Stone Creek Inn logo on it. "As you can see, I got that from the inn gift shop."

Seth had seen him bring it in when they came to change before they went to haul away debris. He never imagined it was something for him. Opening it, he found a green, cable knit sweater folded under some tissue paper.

"Is this because mine's got a hole in it?"

"You won't need it much once the weather gets warm, but today proves you can still use it," Theo said.

"I bet it was expensive," Seth said feeling how soft it was.

"Employee discount," Theo told him.

"Thank you." Seth was touched that he got him something. "It's real nice. I'll save it for a special occasion."

He was folding it up again, but Theo didn't let him put it away. "No. I want to see you wear it. I mean I got it for you to wear."

It seemed to Seth that Theo would be disappointed if he put it away so he agreed. "All right. But I'm going to jump into the shower first."

"Ace and I will start dinner." Theo was already getting stuff out of the fridge, but Seth tried to stop him.

"I can do it. I'll be quick."

"It's been a while since I made quesadillas with Ace. We'll have them with a salad," Theo said and he went to change too.

Seth looked down at the sweater and felt kind of teary-eyed. It wasn't just because it had been so very long since anyone bought anything for him. He was feeling all choked up because this came from Theo.

If it was up to him, he had a feeling he would box it up, keep it as a treasure and never wear it. Good thing Theo said he wanted to see

him wear it, and that gave him a warm feeling too.

Out of the shower and dressed in his new sweater, Seth joined the others in the kitchen. The kitchen was pretty warm with the stove going. Theo was working on dinner and Ace was keeping Butter away from the food.

"Theo doesn't want hair in his food," Ace said to Seth.

"I'm picky that way," Theo said then he looked at Seth in his new sweater and gave him a smile.

"Thanks again," Seth told him. "I'll get the plates."

"Butter likes your sweater," Ace said as the cat strained toward him.

"It's a nice one, and it's from Theo, so I'll let Butter admire it from a safe distance." Seth did pet her though.

"Hear that, Butter? You can't get hair on the sweater either," Ace told her.

"We should light a fire, right?" Seth asked Theo.

"I almost forgot. Ace, you want to help with that, right?" Theo said.

Seth knew how to work a fireplace so he showed them how it was done. Soon they had a good fire going to keep them warm while they ate.

As they ate dinner, the weather outside only got worse. What started out as a little rain turned into a howling storm. Clearing up the table, Seth noticed that Ace and Butter were sticking close together. Ace kept turning toward the sounds of the wind and the creaking noises the house made and reassuring Butter that it was nothing.

"Ace is not liking that storm," Seth said as he went into the kitchen to help wash dishes.

"He is a little jumpy. He has Butter to cuddle with. Sitting by the fire, watching some shows will distract him."

"We have those marshmallows. This might be the night to break them out," Seth suggested.

"Good idea."

All of them sitting on the floor by the fire with marshmallows on sticks had Ace feeling much braver about the howling of the storm. But at his bedtime, Theo went to sit with him. Ace claimed he didn't need to, but Theo did it anyway and stayed with him until he was asleep.

"He's curled around Butter and sleeping soundly," Theo reported when he came back.

Seth was still enjoying the fire. "Now I wish I got more firewood before all this rain hit."

"It's nice to have a fireplace. Thanks for showing us how to use it. Did you used to have one?"

"No, but our neighbor, Moira, did and I helped her with it," Seth said as he poked at the fire and made sparks fly.

"I picture our granddad sitting by this fire in an armchair with a book in his hand. It's too bad Ace never got to meet him. Granddad was always bad at taking care of his health, hated doctors, just ignored his bad heart," Theo said sadly. "And Ace doesn't remember our dad. He was so little when we lost him."

"That's why you play your dad's music for Ace," Seth said.

"This was Dad's too." Theo picked up the PSP 3000 that Ace used to play his video games. "This belonged to our dad. I saved it for Ace and hid it from our aunt so she wouldn't sell it."

"Your dad must have been cool," Seth decided.

"I don't know about cool, but he was into video games. I want to give Ace as much of our dad as I can, things that he loved, things that made him smile. Our dad played this, his hands held it like this, his fingers pressed the buttons. I can still see him a little hunched over, explaining the game to me then letting me play while he cheered me on. Then he called out to our mom, 'He's a natural.' She said, 'Of course he is. Woo hoo!'"

"She sounds cool too," Seth said.

"She liked to play too, but she stopped after our dad died. 'It just makes me cry too hard,' she would say." Theo's smile was so unbearably sad. To lose both of them.

Seth wanted to reach out and hug him or at least put an arm around him but he didn't dare. "I feel bad not hugging you," he admitted to Theo.

"That's my own fault for overreacting before," Theo said.

"Sorry I reminded you of that friend of yours."

"No. I wasn't being fair to you. You're not like him. I shouldn't judge you on what some other guy did. Sorry. And I'm the one who went into your room." Theo then asked him, "How come you keep your door open? You don't like being closed up?"

"Just a habit. I got used to doing that because of my grandpa. That way I could hear him if he needed me or if he just started wandering around for no reason," Seth explained. "He had Alzheimer's."

"That must have been hard."

"When he didn't recognize me any more, that was the worst part. That's when I felt like I didn't have anyone. I was all alone." Seth remembered his grandpa treating him like he was an intruder, telling him to get out of his house, bringing back his fear of being tossed out, abandoned.

"Sorry," Theo said and touched his knuckles to Seth's.

"I still have family out there, just don't know where they are. I know you and Ace have it worse," Seth told him.

"We're coping." Theo said. His fearless posture wasn't easy to crack.

"That's because you're strong and Ace can count on you," Seth told him.

Theo was tough as nails for his little brother's sake. Because of Theo, Ace didn't seem anxious most of the time. Tonight Seth had noticed how Ace looked to Theo during his fearful moments when the noises of the storm scared him. Every one of those times, Theo always looked like he had everything well in hand. But it had to be hard for him.

Seth inched a little closer to him and leaned his shoulder into him. "I'm not hitting on you. I'm just leaning on you and you can lean on me a little too."

Theo laughed. "You're crazy." But he did lean on him.

Chapter 13

Friday afternoon, back from work, Theo was making a list of projects for the weekend. Looking up from his list, he saw the mail truck driving away and heard as Ace started yelling.

"We have a package. A package!" Ace announced, running in then running back outside.

The box Theo was expecting was on the porch and Butter was out there checking it out.

"She's sniffing it a lot," Ace said crouching next to her.

"She's as curious about it as you are," Theo told him. He picked up the box and carried it into the house.

"Is it a present?" Ace asked as he and Butter followed.

"No, but there's some good stuff inside," Theo told him setting the box in the middle of the living room.

He let Ace open it but he wasn't sure if they had time to unpack it before going to get Seth from the café. Just as he was going to tell Ace they had to go, Seth texted to say that Hannah was giving him a ride.

Theo cursed at the phone screen silently then showed Ace what was in the box and tried not to think about what Seth and Hannah might be doing. Maybe Seth would make a move on her, though Hannah seemed more than capable of jumping him first.

Most of the stuff was out of the box, Butter was batting at the crumpled up newspapers that were used for the packing, and while helping clean up, Ace discovered the Sunday comics pages.

"I'm gonna read the comics to Butter," he said.

Theo wasn't doing much either. He was constantly looking out the window, wondering when Seth would be back and what he was up to with Hannah.

When he arrived and came in, Ace jumped up and started telling him all about the package.

"What's this now?" Seth asked since Ace was talking way too fast.

"It's just some of our stuff we left behind. We only brought what we could carry so a friend of mine was storing all this," Theo said pointing at the things he unpacked. "This is the main thing."

He went over to the table where their dad's old laptop was done booting up.

"Can we play the game?" Ace asked, coming over.

"The laptop belonged to our dad. There's a game on it that my dad

was working on," Theo said. He started up the game but it would take a little while to load.

"You mean he made the game?" Seth asked.

"Just something he did in his spare time, like a hobby," Theo said.

"Wow, that's one cool hobby," Seth said, impressed.

"Dad was cool," Ace said to Seth then he leaned in to whisper. "But he was a nerd."

"He must have been one of those cool nerds," Seth said and Ace nodded and smiled.

Theo was eying the laptop screen waiting for the game to finish loading, and he felt Ace lean against him, watching for it too. It took a little while then they saw the welcome screen with the two crossed swords and the words Elemental Warriors.

While Ace played, Seth stayed and watched the game-play closely. Theo kept glancing at him, checking for any sign that he and Hannah made out on the ride over. There weren't any, but that didn't mean anything.

Theo knew he was too intent on knowing. He should have never gone to Seth's room that night. Instead of curing Seth of wanting to be with Hannah, all Theo did was make the whole thing harder on himself.

So what if Seth wasn't straight, but that didn't mean he wanted Theo more than some girl.

Ace was trying to play and explain the game to Seth at the same time, so Theo took over. "There are mages and warriors trying to get to the elemental treasures. You need to gain a minimum of twenty MPs and a team of at least three to move on from each quest."

"There are three of us," Ace said and looked over at Seth then back to the screen.

"It doesn't support multiple players, actually. The other team members are NPCs. You help them out and they become part of your team until the next quest. The game is full of bugs. And you can't save, only pause," Theo said to Seth.

Ace didn't play for long before the game froze on him. "It did it again, Theo. And I almost got the treasure."

"You picked up the glowing spear, didn't you?" Theo asked. He shut down then restarted the laptop.

"I thought maybe it would work this time," Ace said.

"While it restarts, go put down some dinner for Butter," Theo told him.

Once he went, Seth pointed at the laptop. "That game looked good."

"We can play longer than that usually. We learned what choices to avoid to keep the game going. And restarting is painfully long, but the game won't run on anything newer than this." Theo sighed. "It almost

makes me want to tackle those bugs."

"You mean fix them? You can fix the bugs but you don't?" Seth said, confused.

"Some of them, but Ace has grown up with those bugs. He might miss them."

"And you would too," Seth guessed.

It was true. "The bugs are my dad's. It would be like erasing his spirit from the game. I can't do it," Theo said. "Now I'll distract Ace with this."

Theo got out the enlarged photo he had framed and showed it to Seth. "Ace doesn't know about this. Someone tagged a concrete wall with the name Ace. Ace was just learning how to write his name when he spotted it. He got so excited so I took a picture of it and had it printed up and framed."

"You're a good brother," Seth told him.

"It's a small thing. I failed Ace when it comes to the big stuff," Theo said. What Ace had to go through was never far from his mind.

"No way," Seth said, not believing him.

When Theo showed Ace the framed graffiti, he wasn't sure if he would remember it, but he did. "How did you get it, Theo?"

"It came in the box. We'll hang it up in the bedroom," Theo told him.

"That means I'm cool!" Ace said pointing at his name.

Seth agreed. "You sure are." He then nodded toward the kitchen door. "But it looks like Butter wants to go outside."

Ace went out with her then poked his head back inside yelling. "I see a car."

Theo's first thought was that it was Hannah, but going out he saw it wasn't her car.

They all went out and watched as a gray car parked and a petite, young woman with short, dark hair stepped out. She waved and Ace waved back then she went to open the trunk.

"That's my teacher, Ms Kurtz," Ace said.

"Is she here to check up on you?" Seth asked and Theo frowned.

"Oh no. I didn't finish my homework," Ace said and Seth reminded him he had the whole weekend.

Despite being worried about why she was here, Theo tried not to show it as she approached carrying over a small space heater. She set it down and offered Theo her hand. "I'm Noreen Kurtz, Ace's teacher. And you must be the big brother."

"I'm Theo Atkins. Nice to meet you," he told her then he introduced Seth.

"I brought you this thing," she said pointing at the space heater. "This

is a noisy space heater my grandparents hate. Ace mentioned you didn't have heat."

"We have the fireplace working now," Theo told her.

"It might be good to have heat in the bedroom too," Seth said.

"See if you can use it," Noreen told them. "Just don't expect to hear anything else while it's running."

"It looks new," Theo said. "I should pay you for it."

She agreed right away. "Fine. I'll take a dollar."

Theo started to argue. "It's worth..."

"Fine, you drive a hard bargain. Zero dollars. And I have a no return policy. If you hate it, just chuck it. I never want to see it again."

"All right. Thank you." Theo then prompted Ace. "Want to say thank you to your teacher?"

"Thank you, Ms Kurtz," Ace said but he looked uneasy. "Is it charity, Theo?"

Noreen answered before he could. "No. You have to pay me." While Ace looked worried, Noreen named her price. "I know you have a cat. You have to let me cuddle with your cat any time I want. Deal?"

Ace thought about it hard. "OK. It's a deal."

"And I want my first payment right now," Noreen demanded.

"We have to find Butter first," Ace said and started searching for her. Noreen really had him convinced that she was taking proper payment.

"That was nice of her," Theo said while Noreen went to get paid.

"Yeah. She doesn't seem too nice, but she is. Sort of like you," Seth said and Theo gave him the side-eye.

"I bought an ax and a hand saw at the hardware store in town. Left them in the kitchen," Seth told him.

"For chopping wood?"

"And I can trim some of these trees that are close by the house." Seth pointed out a few of them.

"I was going to buy what we needed," Theo told him.

"I'm supposed to pitch in. I did pick up the dinner shift Saturday and Sunday, but I'll help you out as much as I can this weekend."

Theo told him about his plans, though he had a feeling he wouldn't be able to get as much done as he wanted since he was working Sunday.

Noreen spent some quality time with Butter then left her to Ace, and came over to them. "That is a nice cat."

"She's always jumping on us," Theo told her.

"Theo likes her," Seth said and got another dirty look from him.

Noreen was looking at something over his shoulder though. "Oh, no," she said and they saw that they had a new visitor.

A car parked next to Noreen's and soon Sammy and that little redhead, Gloria, were released from the back and went running over to Ace. They were yelling for him, then yelling for the kitty.

Following them much slower was a redheaded woman who had to be Gloria's mother. She was young and hot and had the kind of curves that did nothing for Theo, but he had to resist the urge to check if Seth was drooling over her.

He was distracted by the welcome Noreen gave the hot redhead. "And what are you doing here?"

"Don't pretend you didn't know what would happen when you texted me to brag that you were over here cuddling with the new cat," the redhead told her then she offered her hand to Theo. "Lara Salinger. Sorry to just show up, but I told the girls what Noreen was up to and they started jumping up and down. 'Please, Momma!' and 'Please, Gloria's momma!' I had no choice."

"We're happy to have you. I'm Theo Atkins. This is our friend Seth Brewer."

"Nice to meet you guys," she said.

"You have more guests coming," Noreen said and pointed to the arrival of another car.

This one Theo recognized. It was Wyatt and the boys. The boys ran off to join the other kids and Wyatt came over to greet Theo and the others.

"We were visiting Sam at the café when Lara texted, and the kids wanted to meet the cat," Wyatt said and held up his phone. "I did try texting you then decided to take a chance and swing by."

Theo checked his pockets. "I guess I left my phone inside. Sorry. But you guys are welcome."

"Thanks," Wyatt said while doing some texting. "Now Sam is raking me over the coals for us inviting ourselves over here."

"He's always in trouble with Sam," Lara said, shaking her head.

"What she means is that we're deeply in love," Wyatt said.

"You can invite yourself over," Theo told Wyatt. He was picking up Ace after school. He was owed.

"Should I get us some drinks?" Seth asked.

"I'll help you out," Theo volunteered. As they went in, he couldn't help mentioning Gloria's mom. "That Lara is something."

"Sure. Should we take some snacks out there?"

Theo almost brought her up again, but just took a deep breath instead. Maybe Noreen was more to his liking. Or maybe Theo just needed to stop fixating on Seth and women.

They had guests and not a lot to feed them – half a bag of chips and

a small bag of pretzels. As he was sandwiching together crackers and peanut butter at record speed, Seth wasn't worried. "This is fine, and I can cook up something."

"I'll make food if we need to," Theo said.

"You forgetting our deal again?" Seth asked.

Theo grumbled but didn't argue. "I'll start taking this out there."

Before he was out the door, Seth turned to him and smiled. "It's kind of nice how they all dropped in. It's real friendly, isn't it?"

Theo couldn't help smiling back at him. "It's friendly."

"I'm not used to seeing it up close," Seth admitted and Theo realized how lucky he was. After Aunt Cindy kicked him out, he had friends who put him up and helped him out, who dropped in to hang out with each other and knew they would be welcome. It hurt him to think that Seth didn't get to have that.

So far no one had any complaints about the food or the drinks, other than they didn't have beer. Then they had more guests. Wyatt got a text from Rob asking if he could bring Danny over.

"Of course he can," Theo told him.

A little later, Rob arrived with little Danny as well as their tiny dog, Lenny.

Seth was all over that dog, but then all the children ran over and the little dog had to greet all of them too. The kids had brought Butter, but Lara took over holding her.

"I hear her name is Butter," Rob said with a chuckle.

"Ace was talking about getting a dog, but this cat got right in his face," Theo said to Rob as he scratched her behind the ears.

"We know how it is when you go to that animal shelter in Ashbury. You get caught up in a pet warp," Rob said then he leaned down to talk to Danny. "The cat came from the same place where we got Lenny. That makes her like Lenny's sister or something." Rob was joking but Danny took him seriously.

Standing on his toes to have a closer look at Butter, Danny asked her, "Are you Lenny's sister?"

All the kids waited with bated breath except for Ace and DJ, who shook their heads. When all the younger kids decided that Butter's meow meant that she must be Lenny's sister, DJ looked like he didn't know how to tell them that was impossible. Helplessly he looked over at Ace, but he only shrugged. And none of the adults wanted to set them straight either.

"You like going to school here?" Rob asked Ace.

"The other kids told me there's a scary teacher. So I don't know," Ace said.

"That's me," Noreen told him.

Ace looked up at her. Frowning and staring at her, he finally said, "I just don't know."

Lara cracked up but Noreen only shrugged, like scaring the hell out of kids was a feature not a bug.

"It's cool out here," Rob said, looking around. "Kind of wild."

"The kids are having a blast," Wyatt said. "I'm tempted to climb a few trees." He winked at DJ and Ry, but the younger boy objected.

"Don't let him. He isn't any good at climbing." Ry pouted up at Wyatt. "He fell down from a tree. On his butt."

"He loves reminding me of every time I screwed up," Wyatt said as he ruffled Ry's blond hair thoroughly.

"Like a tiny mother in law," Lara said.

"We have a robot tree," Ace said and all the kids ran off because a robot tree was a thing that had to be investigated immediately.

Some time later, Mitch came by to pick up Sammy then the others started leaving too. Going inside after everyone left, the first thing Theo did was light the fire with Ace's help. Ace was still hyper from having all the kids over and Butter was a little restless too.

Seth was frying bacon for some BLTs, and the smell drew Theo to the kitchen. He started pulling out the other ingredients.

"So you had a good time," Theo said noticing that Seth looked pretty cheerful.

"Yeah. And I'll make sure to buy some food you can serve up for the next time people come over," he said.

"You think this is going to keep happening?" Theo said.

"I think it's likely," Seth told him. "And you still haven't had the rest of them over."

"The rest?"

"Sam. Then there's Mitch's husband, Rico from the cafe, and Rob's fiancé. I forgot his name," Seth said. "They're getting married soon. Everyone is talking about it. Rob's fiancé is a big deal in Peach Tree."

"I guess I need to be ready for more guests," Theo said. "Mitch is married to Rico?"

"I thought you knew that," Seth told him. "They're an odd couple for sure."

Theo liked how casually he spoke about guys being married to each other, but he was still obsessed with who Seth was attracted to.

Theo started up the noisy space heater so Ace could go to sleep in a warm bedroom for once. Listening to it, he wondered if the noise was a safety feature so people couldn't leave it on if they wanted to get any sleep.

Ace got to play Dad's game until he crashed it. Then it was a few shows and off to bed.

After he had Ace settled in bed, Theo went to the kitchen and found Seth in there with a pen and a piece of paper.

"I'm making a shopping list. Need to restock the snacks for sure."

"You certainly take keeping us fed seriously," Theo said and he pulled up the list of chores he put on his phone.

"Of course. Food is my responsibility, and I don't want you worrying you don't have anything to feed guests," Seth said. It was another sign that he was a guy who was used to taking care of things and not having other people take care of him.

"I'm getting texts from my friends about their plans to party and drink until dawn, and I'm making plans for household repairs. It's like they're texting from a different planet," Theo said.

For some reason that made Seth frown. He leaned with his back against the counter and lowered his head. "You said a friend of yours sent you that box. Did you have to leave a lot of friends when you came here?" he asked.

"Some," Theo said while wondering why Seth had his head down while asking him that.

"And, you know... boyfriends?"

"What, you think I had a bunch of boyfriends to juggle?" Theo asked.

"You could, I bet, if you wanted to," Seth said, but still didn't look up.

"Aha." Theo raised an eyebrow at Seth, but he just pressed on with his questioning.

"So did you have a boyfriend?"

Theo was surprised he was that curious. "Not really. Dated some guys."

Seth nodded. "But you did stuff right."

"Yes. You want me to tell you all about it?" Theo didn't intend to, just wanted to see Seth's reaction.

"No," Seth said and raised his eyes, but kept his head down. That made him look like he was glaring at Theo pretty hard.

By now Theo knew that look might not have any meanness behind it, so he just waited. Seth's harsh gaze moved from Theo's face to roam his body. Then Seth pushed himself away from the counter and came over to him. His hands went to Theo's hips and suddenly Seth was kneeling in front of him.

"Whoa, Seth. What are you doing?" That wasn't the right question, but Theo couldn't think. Still he had to know why Seth was doing this. "Trying to prove something?" Theo accused him, restraining him with a hand on his shoulder.

Seth drew back a little but didn't get up off the floor. He was breathing hard as he said, "No, I just... I just want to do something for

you, like what you did for me."

"So you're paying me back?"

"I guess I don't blame you for thinking I'm so desperate to stay with you and Ace, but I'm not trying to pay rent with a blowjob," Seth said.

"That's not..." Theo didn't know what he was thinking questioning this. Seth wanted to blow him. As turned on as he was, Theo had to be crazy to fight against this.

Now Seth could see he was too weak to resist him and he reached for him again. Moving slowly, like he didn't want to spook him, Seth unbuttoned his fly.

With a shiver of intense pleasure, Theo sagged against the fridge. He hung on to the edge of the kitchen counter on one side and reached out to shut the door to the living room with the other.

Seth let his tongue explore, making hot trails over Theo's cock. That went on for a while leaving Theo shaky. Then Seth took him into his mouth and moaned around his cock. Seth pushed forward slowly, not sure how far he could take him. Another moan and Theo had to breathe through the vibration as it traveled up his spine.

Theo was hardly able to catch his breath before Seth started sucking. He was uncertain, halting, but the pressure and heat of his mouth felt amazing.

Theo released his grip on the edge of the counter and reached for Seth. He would much rather hang onto Seth, raking his fingers through his hair and over his powerful shoulders and arms.

Seth's sucking turned eager, fast and Theo felt his orgasm building. Cursing under his breath, he warned Seth he was coming and saw he had his own cock in his fist and was pumping it hard.

They came together and Seth swallowed his come like he was starving for it while he shot over his own hand. It was a hot, incredible sight that had Theo reeling.

After collapsing to the floor, Theo found himself sitting between Seth's legs as he sat against the lower cabinets. Seth's knees were up on either side of him and his arms were locked around Theo like he was never going to let him go.

Chapter 14

On Sunday morning, Seth was making pancakes and Ace was challenging him to make different shapes. Occasionally Theo would look over Seth's shoulder only to see some lumpy shape that didn't look like anything. The game made Ace happy, and when they sat down to eat, the pancakes looked weird but tasted fine.

The day before, Mitch had been by and dropped off some extra tools they could borrow. He also measured the window and put in an order for a new one, promising Theo to find the cheapest possible option.

Today, Theo and Seth planned to take off the rotten boards from the porch. Mitch had marked them off so there would be no guesswork. Theo hated to admit it, but he was looking forward to working side by side with Seth. It was only because he was easy to hang out with and hot, and not because Theo was hung up on him.

In the middle of breakfast, Seth got a text. He looked at his phone then stood up. "Hannah is dropping by," he said and went outside to meet her.

Theo's good mood evaporated and he wondered if Seth would go off with her now. He knew better than to think that the blowjob in the kitchen meant anything, so that wouldn't keep Seth around.

"Is Shawn with her?" Ace wondered and went to the window to watch as she parked.

Hannah was the only one who got out though. She spoke to Seth for a while then she hugged him for way too long. Seth then walked her to her car with an arm around her shoulders while she had her arm around his waist. Theo seethed.

His mood didn't improve even after she drove off and Seth came back in. While he was hiding his reaction, he almost missed how gloomy Seth looked. But then Ace was asking him if he was going to finish his spaceship pancake, and that was when Theo noticed that Seth was sitting at the table but not eating.

Ace was done first and ran off to see what Butter was up to. That left him and Seth at the table, and Theo asked. "Why do you look like that?"

"The reason Hannah came by. She wanted to give me a heads up that the waitress I was covering for was coming back in three days. Rico was going to talk to me when I went into work, but Hannah took it on herself to break the news."

"That was good of her," Theo said, mostly meaning it. Of course this upended their plans for the day. "Forget the porch. You need to spend

the day looking for work."

"Yes, sir," Seth said and gave him a lopsided grin.

"Sorry, but getting a job is a priority."

"They still need me at the cafe for the next few days," Seth said.

"You know I did research on potential employers in the area. You can use that." Theo got his laptop, setting it up on the table and pulling up the file he put together. "I'm doing the breakfast dishes. No arguments," he said because he knew Seth was going to insist on doing them.

After that, he had to keep Seth from getting to work on the porch. The best way was to drag him to Ashbury. Plenty of places didn't advertise, just stuck a sign in the window, so they drove there then went past every storefront and even asked around.

Ace got into the hunt for Help Wanted signs, treating it like it was a game. It wasn't a game though. Theo was worried that Seth might not be able to find work in the area, and who knew where the search for a job might take him.

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Knowing full well that his job wasn't going to last, Seth still got settled in and too comfortable with Theo and Ace. Then there was what he and Theo did. Seth was still figuring out what it meant, and now he didn't even know if he could stay around.

He had no luck finding another job since he stopped waiting tables at the café. That left him time to fix some things around the house. He wanted to work on fixing the porch next. After dropping off Ace at school and Theo at the inn, Seth went to get some supplies.

Coming out from the hardware store in Peach Tree, he ran into Mitch and told him what he was doing. "I was thinking of tackling the porch. Theo and me watched a ton of videos on how it's done."

"Videos are all well and good, but I would like to help you guys with that. First I have a fence to put up north of here. If you come and help me with that, it will go faster and I can help you with the porch," Mitch said. Mitch wanted to pay him, but Seth wanted to do a straight exchange.

First he had to run it by Theo. He didn't jump to say yes but agreed when Seth pointed out Mitch could be one more reference for him.

Theo sure didn't like taking free help. Seth liked his pride, his taste, his hands all over him. Damn he couldn't think about him like that, not when he didn't know how long he could stick around.

In the end, it was a full day's work, but it made Seth happy that Theo

got to come home to a fixed up porch.

"It looks good, and it feels solid," Theo said but Ace was the one giving it a real test.

"Mitch helped with it, so you know it is," Seth said.

"Thanks so much for doing this."

"It was a good learning experience and all that. And Mitch mentioned that he has a lead on a window that's a good price. He said it won't match the others, but he can frame it out so it won't be noticeable. He'll text you when he has the deal nailed down."

"That sounds good," Theo said as the two of them headed inside and left Ace to mess around on the porch with Butter.

"There was another thing Mitch mentioned. They're having people over for a barbeque at his place tomorrow and he invited you, me and Ace." Seth was expecting Theo to be reluctant and he was.

"I don't know..."

"He said Rico wouldn't take no for an answer and Sammy wouldn't either."

"All right, but I'm not going empty-handed," Theo said.

Seth had an idea for that. "I can make some fried apple pies."

"I was going to make something after I came from work," Theo said.

"You got ideas or..."

"No," Theo admitted. "Everything I want to make requires an oven."

"We can make the fried apple pies together, if you want." Seth tried not to sound too hopeful like he was dying to cook with Theo, but he was.

"Sounds good," Theo said.

"I'll get the apples while I'm out job hunting."

Seth got to do some cooking with Theo that very evening. He started dinner and Theo came over to help. Seth was making green beans with bacon.

"Smells good," Theo told him once everything was simmering in the pot.

"The smell is making my stomach hungry," Ace said poking his head into the kitchen. "Can I have a snack?"

"You can't have a snack before dinner," Theo told him. "You can have something later."

"I'm not hungry later. I'm hungry now," Ace said.

"What are you hungry for? I was thinking of making sandwiches to go with this stew," Seth said. "What kind do you want?

"Ice cream sandwiches?" Ace said hopefully.

"Ice cream sandwiches will definitely have to wait for later," Theo told him. "Much later since we don't have any."

"I'll put ice cream sandwiches on the shopping list. I like 'em too," Seth said.

Ace pouted at his big brother. "Me and Seth like stuff and you're a grouch, a grouchy, grouchy grouch."

"Is that right?" Theo grabbed him and started tickling him until he had him squirming on the floor. "Ticklish kids shouldn't mess with their big brothers," Theo told him.

From the floor, Ace gave him a defiant look, but then Theo threatened to keep tickling him, and he scrunched up into a ball and started giggling again.

Watching them together, Seth couldn't believe the warmth that filled him. How the hell was he ever going to be able to leave them?

Chapter 15

Next day at the inn, Theo asked again about possible job openings, but there was nothing. He had already asked only a few days before, but he was getting anxious. The longer Seth went without finding a job, the more Theo worried. What would be his next step? To go somewhere else to find work?

Theo didn't want that, and not because he was hot for him. He hated to think of Seth out there alone with no friends or family.

Despite that, Seth might have moved on already if the work around the house hadn't kept him busy. Now that the porch was fixed, Seth didn't have as much to do and Theo was afraid that he might decide to leave.

That afternoon, before going to Mitch and Rico's barbeque, Theo helped Seth make the fried apple pies. As Seth was setting them aside to let them cool, Theo told him. "You know you can stay with us as long as you need to, and you don't need to spend your money on so many things."

Seth frowned at that. "Our deal is..."

"Things are different now. Once you have a job..."

Theo was cut off by Ace running in. The kitchen was filled with a delicious smell of fried apple pies, so he couldn't stay away. He got to have one that came apart, but after he finished it, he told Seth, "You have to mess up more."

Seth laughed as he arranged the rest on a big plate. "I thought I'd put some cinnamon sugar over them. Never did that before, but they use it at the café."

"Yes. Do it!" That was Ace's vote.

"Yeah, they need more sugar," Theo said and Seth stared at him like he was trying to figure out if he was serious. He wasn't but he still told him, "It's a good idea."

Theo didn't like how they left their conversation unfinished, but they had to get going. The whole way Ace tried to convince him that he should be holding the plate with the dessert they were bringing.

When they arrived in front of an older, two story house, Rico met them in front and welcomed them. Ace told him what they had on the plate and vouched for how good they were.

"I bet they are going to be a hit," Rico said as he took the plate. "Now come around to the back, meet the cats."

They went into a sizable, fenced yard shaded by trees. A grill was set up, but no one else was there yet.

"Are we early?" Theo asked.

"Or everyone else is late. Mitch and Sammy are still busy in the kitchen, I guess," Rico said and he went inside through a back door. He came back out with two orange cats, one cat draped over each shoulder. "You get a cat, and you get a cat." He handed out the cats to Theo and Seth just as Sammy ran out and introduced the cats as Natalie and Veronica.

Instead of trying to climb him like a tree the way Butter did most of the time, Veronica curled up in Theo's arms.

"You're holding her like a baby," Sammy said approvingly.

Ace reached up for the cat. "Me now."

"Remember what Sammy showed you," Theo told him.

"Oh yeah." Ace got close to the cat and just looked at her, reminding Theo of how he and Butter met. This cat sniffed at him but didn't go over to him even as he petted her.

Sammy looked up at Theo. "She likes you."

"How can she resist that sweet face?" Rico said and Theo heard echoes of his grandmother, Mrs. Del Rio.

"Theo, is he hitting on you?" Ace asked as he moved on to the cat Seth was holding.

"What? I'm a married guy," Rico told him.

"Really?" Ace said looking at him like he didn't believe it.

"I guess you don't look like a married guy," Seth said.

"He doesn't," Ace agreed.

"He's married to my dad," Sammy informed them. "We had a Valentine's wedding. That's the best kind."

"I'll show them," Rico said and he whipped out his phone. Then he started showing them wedding pictures, lots of them. There didn't seem to be an end to them.

Ace finally accepted defeat. "OK, OK. I believe you," he huffed, making a face.

"I commandeered every picture anyone took at our wedding. All of them," Rico said. It sounded like a threat to show them more.

"No more!" Ace said then he kind of changed his mind. "Maybe just the ones with the cake."

Sammy asked to see pictures of "the sticky tower," whatever that was. Rico showed the kids more pictures, and Theo and Seth said hi to Mitch as he came out with a tray of burger toppings.

"Thanks for coming, guys. And I just spotted Wyatt's car out in front," he told them.

He had only just set down the tray when Rico latched onto him. "Do I look more married now?" Rico asked as he and Mitch had their arms around each other.

"A little bit," Seth said.

Sam and Wyatt arrived with the boys running ahead of them and heading straight for Sammy and Ace.

"Too bad they didn't bring those two little dogs," Seth said and Theo shook his head at him.

"Are those the home baked buns you promised us?" Rico asked as Wyatt took something to Mitch at the grill. "You should see what these guys brought. I think Seth here is trying to challenge you to a cooking competition."

Seth denied it. "I'm not. Theo and I just made some fried apple pies."

"Our oven doesn't work, and Seth has been amazing at making things on the range," Theo said.

"See, he is trying to challenge you," Rico insisted to Sam.

Sam ignored him, and turned to Seth. "We miss you at the café."

"We do," Rico agreed, getting serious but only for a moment. "But the silver lining is that now I can harass Seth as much as I want."

Seth looked like he didn't know what to make of that, and Theo glared at Rico. That only made him smirk.

"Did I hear someone say, 'Keep your hands off my man?'" Rico asked as he stared right back at Theo. "Was that you defending your turf?"

"I didn't say a thing," Theo told him.

"No, but that dirty look you're giving me is speaking to me loud and clear," Rico said and looked from Theo to Seth, who had his eyes on the ground and kicking at some twigs.

"Could you just for a change of pace not hound people?" Sam said to Rico.

So Rico turned his attentions on him. "Oh, you want some?" He pulled Sam into a bear hug and reassured him. "Don't you worry. You're still the favorite. But that doesn't mean I don't have room for more." He then narrowed his eyes at Seth who barely met his evil gaze. "You better watch it, or I'm going to take Theo for myself."

"What's he up to now?" Wyatt asked, coming over.

"I was telling everyone that I was Sam's biggest fan, but I let you borrow him out of pity," Rico told him.

Hearing this Wyatt nudged Rico out of the way and pulled Sam to him. "I am and always will be Sam's biggest fan." Wyatt kissed his husband then looked deep into his eyes and declared. "You know I am. And when I'm the king, I'm the king."

Caught between them, all Sam could do was shake his head.

Good thing Lara arrived with her daughter and Noreen, giving Theo and Seth a chance to escape in the commotion of greetings and kids

screaming.

"Everyone here is insane," Theo said and watched Seth to see how much all the insanity was bothering him.

"It's all in good fun, I guess," Seth said, but Theo could tell Rico's teasing about the two of them made him uncomfortable.

Theo was going to talk to him about it, but Ace ran over and pointed out who just arrived. It was Danny and his little dog with Rob and a hot, dark haired, bearded guy who must have been his fiancé.

"Theo, that might be his big bro," Ace told him. "Big bro like you."

Theo smiled down at him and Rob introduced them to Danny's brother, Julian Brenner, who was also his fiancé. Next he introduced Seth to Julian, but Seth couldn't wait to get down to Lenny's level and pet him.

Pulling on Theo's arm, Ace jumped in. "This is my big brother, Theo."

"The big brothers should arm wrestle," Rico said, coming over to make trouble.

Ace was all for it. "Yeah! Do it!"

"We'll just leave it at a handshake," Theo told him.

Now Ace turned to Danny, "You want to arm wrestle?"

"Can Lenny wrestle too?" Danny asked though Lenny was busy getting some love and affection from Seth.

"Sure, you and Lenny can team up," Ace told him.

Danny loved that idea and they ran off to start some kind of arm wrestling tournament that turned into rolling around on the ground.

"So you two are getting married soon. Congratulations," Theo said to Julian and Rob.

"Yes, and the peach trees should be in bloom right in time," Rob said putting his arm around Julian and smiling at him. At that Julian looked kind of embarrassed, but also like a happy, soon to be married guy.

Theo could tell that Rob was a lot more outgoing than his fiancé. Then Rico threw his arm over Julian's shoulders and both guys glared at him. That didn't stop Rico from putting his arms around both of them as he told Theo and Seth, "These guys went all out when Mitch and I got married. A thousand origami cranes made by their very own hands, plus Danny's. And Lenny helped."

"Danny is making our boutonnieres," Julian said.

"So construction paper flowers in your buttonholes?" Rico said.

"No, Lara will be helping him," Julian said.

Rico went to help Mitch at the grill, but then he saw Theo and Seth talking to Wyatt and Rob. Rico waved the spatula at them in warning, "Don't you dare join the ranks of my enemies."

"Actually he's a lot more chill since he and Mitch got hitched," Rob said.

Theo found that hard to believe. "This is chill?"

"Rico is a handful whichever way you slice it," Wyatt said.

"I know you're dissing me!" Rico called out and Sammy heard him.

"Are the guys being mean to you, Rico?" she asked.

First leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek, Rico didn't hesitate to complain to her. "They're teaming up against me."

Sammy came over to look at each one of them sternly. "Be nice to Rico," she told them and walked away while shaking her head. "Boys."

"You just got us scolded by a little kid," Rob told Rico just as Sammy started yelling excitedly.

It turned out Mr. Copeland and Andy were coming over with baby Lucy and that black and white collie they saw them walking when they first met.

"Looks like my bosses are here," Theo said to Seth, but Sammy saw it differently.

"The baby is here!" she screamed and ran over, reaching up to her as Mr. Copeland held her.

"And I thought she was crazy about cats," Seth said though now all the kids were clustered around the new arrivals.

"Like you're not going to be all over that dog," Theo told him.

"I might pet him a little," Seth said, but he wasn't fooling anyone.

He was all over Huey, the dog, but he had some competition from the kids as they were introducing Ace to Lucy and the dog, though Ace recognized him.

"Lucy is our baby friend," Riley said.

"And Huey is our dog friend," Gloria said while hugging the dog.

Eventually Theo got to greet his bosses. "With that throng of kids, it's like you are a celebrity bodyguard, Mr. Copeland," Theo told him.

"I'm only Mr. Copeland at work," he said so Theo risked needling him a little.

"So I can call you Mr. C?"

He laughed. "How about Leo?"

"Alright."

"You're just in time to eat burgers we're serving up on Sam's homemade buns," Rico said to Andy.

"We got held up by a tug of war. My aunts wanted to keep Lucy there until your grandmother arrived and they could taunt her with how cute the baby was."

"Yeah, they're off having old lady fun and scratching each other's eyes out," Rico said and clapped Andy on the back. "Now let's eat. Want a burger, little baby?" Rico took the baby's tiny hand and she smiled at him.

The kids were the first to line up for the burgers, and Ace was a big fan of the "real burgers from a fire!" as he called them. Tasting the

burgers for himself, Theo had to agree.

"These are outstanding," he told Mitch and Rico, and included Sam too. "And these buns are just great."

"Makes you realize how much you need a grill," Seth said to Theo.

"You know what he's getting at," Rico said and he nudged Theo with his elbow. "Nothing like grilling together with your man." Rico looked over at Mitch, gave him a beaming smile and leaned into him. Returning his smile, Mitch put his arm around him but then he frowned and looked up.

In a second, they all felt drops of rain hitting them, and Mitch announced, "Let's move things inside for dessert."

They went in and Theo got a look at the house inside. It was older but well taken care of with traditional furniture and pretty big.

"This is a really nice house," he told Mitch.

"We have it thanks to Rico's grandmother. She had me work on it, and let me and Sammy live here when we had nowhere else to go," Mitch said.

"And now you've helped us with the house and haven't charged for it," Theo said.

"Seth traded for the work on the porch by helping me on another job," Mitch told him.

"That means the two of you helped me out together, and I owe you both. Let me know what I can do to repay you," Theo told him then he looked to see what Ace was up to and noticed that Seth was standing nearby with his head down.

Was he upset? Theo was going to ask him, but then he heard the kids yelling. Rico had asked them if they wanted whipped cream with their fried apple pies, and they were all clamoring for it.

While different conversations were going on, the kids were trying to persuade Andy and Leo that the baby should have whipped cream. Seth was sitting on the end of a sofa next to Huey, running his hand through his fur. He didn't look happy though. He had been subdued since they came in, or did it start before that?

They stayed for a while, but Theo couldn't draw him out. Ace had a great time though and couldn't stop chattering on the whole drive home. Then he told Butter all about it even while he was brushing his teeth.

"You'll get toothpaste everywhere," Theo told him.

It took Ace a while to settle down and go to sleep, but Theo was glad he had so much fun. Now he wanted to find out what was on Seth's mind.

He didn't find him in the house though. It turned out he had gone

out on the porch.

"Enjoying the porch?" Theo said as he came out.

"It's nice out here, but it's still cold. It will be a treat to hang out here when the weather gets warm." Seth had his arms wrapped around himself as he looked out into the dark. Then he said what Theo had been afraid of. "Too bad I won't be here for that."

"You might still find a job. Give it more time. Or is there some other reason you want to leave?" Theo questioned him and he couldn't keep the edge out of his voice.

"I just think it might be time to cut my losses," Seth said. "I haven't had any luck here."

Theo shut his eyes. Maybe he shouldn't take that personally. Seth was probably talking about his job search, but Theo couldn't help it. Seth didn't see any reason to stay. He didn't want to be here any more.

As Seth went inside, Theo didn't follow him in. Left alone out there on their newly repaired porch, Theo wanted to smash it to pieces.

Chapter 16

Ever since he lost his job at the café, Seth had trouble sleeping, but last night, after telling Theo he would have to leave, he didn't get a wink of sleep.

He was up plenty early to make pancakes. There were even chocolate chips this time. Ace was in and out, telling him what shapes to make. As Theo came in for a cup of coffee, he lingered waiting for Ace to run out of the kitchen again then he spoke up.

"I think it will upset Ace if you leave too suddenly. Can you give it a few more days?" Theo asked, his expression grim.

"I'm not just gonna run off," Seth said. He hated to think of Ace upset, and Theo was looking mad even as he was asking him to stick around a bit longer.

Leaving was going to be hard, but staying was too. Being around Theo... Seth couldn't take it, not when he was always thinking about never seeing him again, never touching him again.

Theo was willing to let him stay, but that was no good. Seth had heard him talking to Mitch, telling him how he felt he owed him. And Theo probably felt sorry for him too, a pitiful guy with no family.

Knowing what he had to do didn't make it any easier. Theo was making a home for Ace in this house and it felt like it, but Seth knew he wasn't part of that, just some guy sticking around where he didn't belong.

After breakfast, Seth wanted to do some work around the house, maybe clear the driveway of all the overgrown bushes, but Theo wasn't having it. He wanted them on the road to help Seth look for a job. Theo made a list of more places to try, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

At the end of the day, Seth only got to fill out two applications and those were a long shot. Theo was even quieter than usual, but when they arrived back at the house and Ace was running inside to see Butter, Theo broke his silence. "At least you'll have to stay until you hear back from those two places."

He didn't say much to Seth for the rest of the day, but once Ace was in bed, Theo came to sit next to him as he poked at the logs in the fireplace. For a few minutes he just stared at the flames while Seth

tried not to stare at him, the glow in his eyes and on his skin. Seth was thinking about how warm Theo would feel, when he spoke up to ask, "Other than a job, what are you looking for out there?"

Seth didn't have a good answer. He just didn't want to be a burden to Theo when he had Ace to take care of. "I didn't plan to end up here, in another small town," he said. Seth didn't yearn for city life, but he had to explain himself and not make Theo feel sorry for him.

"You have your heart set on something bigger," Theo said. "So where are you planning to go?"

Seth was a little caught off guard since he had no real plans. He didn't want to look at what lay ahead. He knew that after being here, the time that waited for him would be dark and lonely.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I... I'll look for my family," Seth said. It was something that he didn't really want to do. "I don't even know if they heard about my grandpa's passing. I'll start with my mom. I was last in touch with her." He didn't tell Theo that was years ago. But now that he said he would look for his parents, Seth thought he might even do something like that.

"You know where she is?" Theo asked. When Seth shook his head, Theo stood up and went to his laptop. "Give me her name. I can do some searching online."

Seth didn't want him doing that. "I already... I have some, you know, leads. Some people I can ask." He wasn't a good liar, but he didn't want to see what Theo might find out. His mother had a new family, that much he knew. As for his father, he sounded angry and drunk the last time Seth spoke to him and yelled at him never to call again.

Until he left Waterfield, Seth had been easy to find, living with his grandfather. All those years same address, same phone number, but he didn't hear from his parents. He knew nothing good waited for him if he ever found them.

"I'll just figure it out as I go," Seth told Theo. "I'll get some sleep now. Good night."

He was going to his bedroom too early, and he had a hunch he wouldn't get any more sleep than he did last night. But sitting up with Theo would have been a bad idea, and not because he might question him about his plans some more.

He needed to keep his distance from Theo because every time he was alone with him, he started thinking about doing things, where he might touch him, how good he tasted and felt, what noise Theo might make when he was coming. Even now Seth was remembering what they did, how good it was.

But it was more than just getting off together. Being with Theo gave him a feeling he couldn't figure out. It was sort of like friendship, but with a stronger ache. He wanted to take care of Theo and protect him,

make sure he was happy and feeling good.

He wasn't capable of doing any such thing. He was dead weight. That's why he had to make himself leave even when all he wanted was to stay with Theo and keep him warm and safe.

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Theo was manning the reception desk with Helen. She was a big talker, liked to gossip, and she had given him a lead on one of the jobs Seth applied for. Now she was telling him about some painting Seth could do for a neighbor of hers, but it was only a day or two, and it wouldn't keep him from leaving to find an actual job.

While monitoring the inn's website, Theo kept an eye on the main doors for new arrivals. He was surprised to see Hannah come in and make her way straight to the reception desk.

Before she could say why she was there, Helen greeted her, "Why, Hannah, what brings you here? How are your folks?"

"Fine, same as always," Hannah said offhandedly then she pointed at Theo. "I'm here to talk to him."

"I'm going to have to take a break," he said to Helen and stepped away.

"What are you doing about Seth?" Hannah demanded. "You know he's dead set on leaving? He said you're not pushing him out, but are you doing anything to make him stay? Are you?"

"Why don't you get him to stay?" Theo would have been glad to have Seth stay even if she was the reason, but she threw it right back at him.

"You're the one driving him away."

"Sorry to spoil your fun," Theo told her, but he wondered if she was right. Was he the real reason Seth was leaving?

"You're telling me you're OK with him moving away?" Hannah challenged him.

"I need to get back to work," Theo said.

"I don't know why the hell Seth keeps defending you," she said and stomped out the door.

Watching her go, Theo couldn't deny that she must care a lot to hunt him down here. But what could he do? If she was so hot for Seth, why the hell didn't she do something about it?

But maybe it was up to Theo to get to the bottom of this.

For the rest of the day, Theo turned it over in his head. The way Seth talked about his plans sounded so vague, like he didn't want to get into the details. But why not? Was it because it was an excuse?

When Theo considered the timing, he had to wonder if something that happened at the barbeque pushed Seth into his decision to leave.

The only thing Theo could think of was all that teasing from Rico about them being together. When Rico was saying that stuff, Seth looked really uncomfortable. Maybe he realized that living with a gay guy meant people could guess what he had been up to.

Was that really it? Theo couldn't be sure, but Seth wasn't in such a hurry to leave until then.

One thing Theo knew – Seth leaving wouldn't be real to him until he told Ace about it. Theo didn't know how much longer Seth would wait. He had to talk to Ace.

Seth drove him and Ace home then started cooking dinner. Ace couldn't wait to let Butter out. He was playing outside with her, and Theo called him over to sit on the porch steps with him.

He started by saying, "I know you like having Seth with us."

Ace agreed. "It's good because sometimes you're grouchy."

"I'm not that grouchy," Theo said but he knew he had been in a bad mood ever since Seth told him he would be leaving. And now he had to tell Ace and make him unhappy too.

"It's still good to have another guy to talk to," Ace said very seriously.

"You can always talk to me," Theo told him with a smile and stroked his hair.

Ace frowned at him though. He could tell something was wrong. "Theo, you don't want me to be friends with Seth, is that it? Are you jealous? I'm not gonna like him better than you, you know."

"You... what? I'm not jealous of Seth," Theo told him.

"OK. I believe you." That's what Ace said, but it sounded like he didn't.

"You know Seth might have to leave and go somewhere else to find a job," Theo told him and watched his face crumple.

"No. He has to stay with us."

Theo pulled him into a hug. "Sorry, but Seth might go and look for his mom and dad too."

"But then he can come back." Ace sounded so miserable as he looked to Theo for reassurance.

"Maybe. We'll see." Theo wasn't counting on it. He was pretty sure that Seth wanted to get away from him.

***

All day Seth was working on the picnic table. If he built it right, the table would still be there even after he was gone and that gave him a

good feeling. It didn't take away his sadness though.

Especially now that Ace knew he was leaving. The little guy wasn't happy with him. The only part that made sense to him was that Seth might go look for his mom and dad. Ace didn't understand that Seth's parents weren't like his and Theo's. They wouldn't welcome Seth with open arms.

That night, after Ace was in bed, Seth planned to escape to his bedroom, but Theo didn't let him.

"Let's go out on the porch," Theo told him then went out without checking that Seth followed.

He did and then he waited for Theo to say his peace. It was cold out and the porch light lit up Theo's hair. Seth longed to touch it, and then touch more of him, so he dragged his eyes away and just stared at the moonlit trees and shrubs, their branches mostly bare. Any day now spring would turn everything out there green, but he wouldn't be standing on this porch and seeing it.

He heard Theo take in a deep breath and knew he was about to speak.

"When I told Ace that you were going to look for your parents, I felt like I was telling him a lie. Why is that?" Theo turned a pair of sharp, beautiful eyes on him, and Seth had to lower his gaze. Theo took that as an answer though Seth didn't mean it to be. "So the job and going to look for your parents – that's not the real reason you're leaving."

"I never planned to stay, you know that," Seth said.

"I noticed how uncomfortable you've been around me. You've been avoiding me, like you suddenly don't like sharing space with a gay guy."

Seth couldn't believe what he was saying. "That's not true."

"So you like it?" Theo asked stepping up to him provocatively, like he expected Seth to step back. "You said before you didn't know how to act around me. That means I make you uncomfortable."

"No." That's all Seth managed to say. With Theo standing so close, he couldn't think. He had to turn his eyes away.

"You told me a bunch of lies, and now you can't even look at me," Theo accused him.

"I can look at you." But as Seth's eyes returned to Theo's face, he found that wasn't as easy as he thought. There was a catch in his throat and he couldn't swallow. His breathing wanted to speed up but he didn't let it.

"Theo," he whispered and watched his jaw clench.

Theo thought he didn't want to be around him, and even if Seth was leaving for good, he didn't want him thinking that. He didn't know

how to prove to him it wasn't true because he had been avoiding him lately. He was used to people believing the worst about him, but from Theo it hurt worse than anything.

He had to take away the accusing look from Theo's eyes though.

What could he say? Even at his best he had trouble explaining himself, and the way he felt right now, he couldn't think more than two words at a time.

"You make me feel things I don't understand," he admitted.

"And that's why you're running away from me," Theo said.

"It's not. I just... I have to live my own life, not yours," Seth told him, and watched Theo shut his eyes tight like he couldn't stand to look at him another second.

"Do what you want," he said and turned to go inside.

Seth reached his hand to stop him, but he was too slow. Theo was gone.

Feeling the night and the cold gather around him, Seth hung his head. He wanted to tell Theo that he liked the life he had here. If he had a job, he would love it here. But he was depending on Theo for everything, and soon his money would run out and he wouldn't even be able to chip in for food. That was no way for him to live.

In the end, he couldn't make Theo understand, but maybe that's just how it had to be. Maybe there was no good way to leave.

Chapter 17

So now Theo knew that he was right. Seth was leaving because he didn't want to be pulled into being gay by living with him.

He almost wished he didn't know, didn't feel this bitter anger boiling up inside him. But no matter how mad Theo was, he hated to think of Seth out there all alone. He already had loneliness written in his eyes. There would only be more of that out there for him unless his family suddenly embraced him.

Why the hell was he worrying about Seth? If he found himself alone, it would be his own damn fault.

At breakfast, Theo stayed tightlipped so he wouldn't tell Seth to go to hell. Just thinking of Seth abandoning them made him want to ram his fist into something. But seeing Theo so silent and grim made Ace uneasy. He would need to fix that, make sure Ace knew that everything would be OK.

Seth was still picking up Ace from school today. He texted Theo that he was on his way to the school and then again, but this time he was asking if he could bring Ace to the inn for a visit.

Theo didn't want to deny him, so he said OK.

When they arrived, Seth hung back and Ace ran over to the reception desk. "Sammy said I could come here to see you and the baby."

"I don't think the baby is here today," Theo told him.

"Just you then," Ace said.

Next to him Helen laughed. "Hi there. I'm Helen."

"I'm Ace," he said then he spotted Leo and Andy. "Theo, I see people we know."

"My bosses," Theo said as Acv waved to them.

"Mr. Atkins. Mr. Atkins." Leo nodded to Theo and Ace as he approached.

"Ace is here just to say hello," Theo said and hoped that wasn't a problem.

"I see Seth is here too," Andy said then he turned to Leo. "The sooner we replace McNeil, the better." McNeil was one of the waiters who worked in the tearoom, and if he was being replaced...

Andy called Seth over, and Theo couldn't help getting his hopes up. He gave Ace permission to have a look around in the gift shop as long as he didn't touch anything.

"There's an opening for a server in the tearoom," Leo said to Seth.

"I thought there weren't any openings," Theo said.

"This morning Ms Silver let us know that one of the wait staff wasn't

up to snuff," Leo said.

"Poor guy kept messing up orders," Helen said. "All those different kinds of tea."

"I don't think he took the job seriously. McNeil is barely out of high school," Andy said, except that Seth wasn't that much older. Theo had to wonder if Ms Silver would give him a chance, and Seth looked like he was thinking the same thing.

Noticing Seth's worry, Andy said, "I don't think a lack of seriousness will be an issue where you are concerned."

"I don't have much experience or a lot of references," Seth said and now Theo was thinking that maybe he didn't want to work there.

"You have experience as a server at the Peach Tree Café, don't you?" Leo said. "Around here there isn't a more valuable reference than Mrs. Del Rio."

"You'll be interviewing with Ms Silver. She'll be making the final decision," Andy said to Seth who still looked unsure.

"As far as she's concerned, the tearoom isn't just an eatery, it's an experience." Leo looked like he might roll his eyes at his own words, but he didn't. Whatever he might think of the tearoom experience, the place did good business. But would Seth go after a job there.

"I'll be happy to apply for it. Thank you," Seth said and Theo's heart started to race. He was getting too excited about a job that Seth might not get.

Leo sent him to fill out an application and then he went in for the interview with Ms Silver. The whole time, Theo's stomach was in knots and he didn't dare tell Ace about the possible job. He was too afraid to get his hopes up. Seth just didn't seem like the right type to work in the tearoom, and he was dressed too casually for a job interview. Theo wasn't sure Ms Silver would be able to see past that.

Leo arranged for Ace to sit in the lobby and get served some cookies, and Theo gave him his phone to play games on. Feeling on edge as he waited, Theo was glad when a guest stopped by to complain that the room service she forgot to order never arrived. Theo handled it smoothly, apologizing for their failure to be psychic.

"That one would lose her head if it wasn't screwed on," Helen said when the lady was barely out of earshot. "And the way you finessed her. Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth."

"I did tell you that Butter is the name of our cat," Theo told her and she cracked up.

Constantly glancing toward the tearoom, Theo could swear that the job interview was taking forever. It wasn't, he just couldn't calm down. Then Theo got busy on the computer and when he looked up,

Seth was standing outside the tearoom. He was looking down then toward Theo.

"You looked busy," he said when he came over. "I got it. I got the job in the tearoom."

"Congratulations," Theo said. It sounded bland, meaningless, like he didn't care either way, but he wanted to launch himself over the reception desk and hug and kiss him to death. He couldn't believe how hard his heart was beating, like the power of this news could knock him off his feet. He wanted to laugh and cry and all because Seth got a job and that meant he would be staying.

Seeing that Seth was back, Ace ran over and Theo gave him the news.

"Seth doesn't have to leave!" Ace said way too loud and a few heads turned.

"Should have told him outside," Theo said, but he didn't blame him for getting so excited when Seth leaving seemed like a sure thing. Things were still tense and uncomfortable between the two of them, so Theo kept his own feelings under wraps.

He reached over the reception desk and high fived Ace then sent him off home with Seth. Theo was still mad at him, but that didn't seem to change how happy and relieved he was.

And it did occur to him that if Seth took that job, it meant he didn't really want to leave.

When Theo got home, he wasn't sure what he would say to Seth, but he didn't get the chance to talk to him. As soon as Theo was through the door, Ace was jumping up and down, telling him his idea. "Theo! We should have a party."

"A party?" Theo thought about it. "We have that picnic table. We could make some food, have a few people over."

"A real party, not just us?" Ace said, getting even more excited.

"Yes, a real party." Theo glanced at Seth. When he didn't disagree, Theo got his phone out. "I'll send some texts."

"I'll see what we can feed 'em." Seth then looked in the fridge for a while. "We have this ground beef. I could make something with that."

"I don't think we'll be feeding them dinner," Theo said after getting some replies. "Most of them are saying they can stop by after."

"I'll fry up some meatballs. We can serve 'em up to guests and have meatball subs for dinner," Seth said.

"Not for me. I'll grab something later. I want to mix up some dip," Theo told him and started pulling out ingredients.

"I'll eat later too and just make one sub for Ace. I can make a cheese dip too," Seth offered.

They started making food and even put Ace to work a little bit, but mostly he had his hands full keeping Butter off the kitchen counter. In the end, Theo just had to kick them out.

As he and Seth worked, Theo was very aware of how small that kitchen was and also that they hadn't really talked. This wasn't the time for it, and anyway, Theo didn't know what he would say.

Lara and Gloria were the first to arrive and they brought peach iced tea and some homemade caramel striped shortbread cookies. "It's a new recipe I'm trying," Lara said.

"Looks great," Theo said.

Gloria pointed up at the sky. "Look, Momma, birds are coming back. They are bringing spring with them."

"This girl loves spring," Lara said as Gloria spotted Ace and ran off calling for him and Butter. "I smell good things cooking." Lara was pointing to the open kitchen door.

"We're a little more ready for guests this time thanks to Seth," Theo told her.

"It's great news that he found work," Lara said and then gave him a meaningful look like she knew exactly how he felt about it.

"It is," Theo agreed, but he was also thinking about what almost sent him running. Would Seth be embarrassed again today about people thinking there was something going on between them?

Rico and Mitch only stopped by to drop off Sammy. Theo and Lara went over to their SUV since they weren't getting out.

"Sorry we can't stay. We're driving to a lumberyard," Mitch said.

"Sounds romantic," Lara said to them.

"Any drive with my man is romantic," Rico said and he draped his arm over Mitch's shoulders as he leaned into the driver's side to talk to them.

"OK, Sammy is in good hands. Now you can get handsy with Mitch while he drives," Lara instructed him.

"I like how you think, lady," Rico gave her a wink and they drove off.

Wyatt and Sam arrived with the boys, but it turned out Sam couldn't stay long. "I have to go back to the café. I just want to congratulate Seth on his new job."

"He's finishing up some cooking. I better go see if he needs help," Theo told them.

"I'll come with you," Sam said.

Sam and Seth got into some cooking talk, and Theo took more food out. The kids were playing among the trees while the adults stayed closer to the house.

Coming out, Sam told Theo. "I'm so relieved that Seth got that job. Hannah was saying that he planned to leave."

Theo tried not to make a face when her name was mentioned. "Ace was very happy about that too."

"And you." Sam didn't make it sound like a question so Theo didn't say anything in reply.

The food was all set out on the picnic table Seth made. He was done cooking, but Theo could swear he lingered inside longer than he needed to.

Theo went over to find him cleaning up. "You did most of the cooking. I can take care of clean up later. This party is to celebrate your new job."

"Right," Seth said and came outside just as Julian and Rob arrived with Danny and Lenny.

"They take that dog everywhere," Theo noticed.

"I think he makes Danny feel safer," Seth said. "Sam mentioned the little guy had some trauma and he was trying to get over being afraid of cars and loud noises." He then went over and greeted everyone but the dog especially.

Theo hung back thinking about Ace and his fears. Most of the time he was doing OK. But at night he sometimes woke up from nightmares, or just called for Theo when he got scared by noises outside.

Shaking himself out of it, Theo went to greet Julian and Rob as they joined the others. There was some kind of cooking discussion again.

"Sam can't forgive us because we weren't born knowing how to cook," Julian said and then he and Sam glared at each other.

Lara shook her head and put a positive spin on it. "When people don't know how to cook, it just means you get to show off."

"And then there are sexy cooking lessons," Wyatt said and gave Sam a provocative leer.

"God knows what they're going to imagine us doing," Sam complained.

"Don't worry about them. It's my imagination that's running wild." Wyatt nuzzled his neck, but Sam pushed him away.

"I have to be going," Sam said. He waved to the boys as he started going to the car, but then he turned back to where Theo and Seth were standing with Wyatt.

"Missed me already," Wyatt said and grabbed for him.

Sam dodged and turned to Theo and Seth. "I was thinking you guys

could come over for some homemade pizza. Maybe Sunday."

"Homemade pizza. Who can say no to that?" Wyatt said.

"Sounds great," Theo said then he looked at Seth like he was challenging him. "You in?"

"I don't know my schedule yet. Sorry. But you all have fun." It didn't surprise Theo that Seth wanted to get out of it.

Wyatt didn't take it as a final answer though. "We'll firm up the plans when you find out your schedule."

Sam left, and Theo eyed Seth wondering if he would find some other reason not to go, like the fact that it made them seem like a couple to be going places together.

"Butter spit up a hairball!" Gloria announced and all the kids clustered around to see it.

"You guys, don't do anything weird with that hairball!" Wyatt warned them.

"Like what?" Ace wondered and all the kids looked eagerly at Wyatt like they wanted to know the answer too.

Lara hissed at Wyatt, "Don't you dare give them any ideas."

Wyatt laughed.

"I can't think of anything weird to do with a hairball," Seth said.

"You don't have a wicked mind," Lara concluded.

Seth went over to the kids, and Theo went to talk to Rob and Julian over by the table with the food and drinks. Theo kept looking over at Seth and telling himself to stop doing it. But he also caught Seth glancing his way.

"I see the porch is good as new," Rob said. "You're in the home stretch."

"The window is scheduled to be fixed, but we still need a lot of furniture," Theo said and tried not to pay any attention to Seth. Still he couldn't help noticing when Wyatt and Lara went over to the kids, and Seth came over to the picnic table to fuss with the food.

"Furniture? We can hook you up," Rob said and nudged Julian.

"I have kind of gone crazy redecorating, so we're getting rid of a lot of furniture," Julian said. "I don't want things around that belonged to my grandfather. Bad memories."

That was the opposite of how Theo felt. "And I've been wishing there was more of my grandfather's things left here."

That's when Seth spoke up unexpectedly. "The house is here for you and for Ace and that's the must important thing. It's like your grandpa is sheltering you and taking care of you."

Theo smiled and the guys stared at Seth making him get embarrassed. "That's a good way to think of it," Theo told him.

"You guys should come by the house and pick out some furniture," Julian said.

"Do it when you can bring Ace over," Rob added. "Danny will be thrilled."

Julian and Rob were telling them what they planned to get rid of, the changes they were making. They had just started talking about their upcoming wedding when Danny and Ace came over, both of them looking upset. Danny was hugging Lenny to him, and Julian picked up both of them to hold them in his arms.

Sitting at the picnic table, Theo drew Ace to sit next to him. "What happened?"

With a sad expression, Ace looked at him then at Seth, who stuck close by. "Ry found a dead bird and he got sad. Wyatt told him that anything that's alive has to die and it's only natural. Then Ry said that his dads couldn't die. But that's not true, is it? Anyone can..." Ace stopped and lowered his head.

Theo pulled him into a hug. "Just because something bad can happen doesn't mean that it will. We have to think positive." He stroked Ace's hair and kissed the top of his head.

Looking over at Danny who was being consoled by Julian and Rob, Ace put on a determined face. "Yeah. I'm gonna be positive."

"I was thinking I might make a skillet cookie," Seth said.

"A what?" Ace asked, very interested.

"We can't bake a cookie without a working oven, but we can make a cookie on the range," Seth told him.

"One cookie?" Ace said.

"One big cookie."

Ace was all for it. He called all the kids over and they followed Seth into the kitchen and watching as he made a big cookie.

"I'm glad he found a way to distract them," Julian said, but he was still watching Danny closely.

Once the cookie was made and divided up between the kids, Theo told Seth, "You did a good thing."

"Our neighbor's granddaughter made one of these when she visited. She's a college girl and she only had a hotplate to work with at her dorm."

"I see," Theo said and tried not to let his imagination get away from him where Seth and this girl were concerned. He just wished he could stop noticing how great Seth was. He wasn't just hot. He was helpful and kind. And also afraid of people thinking he was gay.

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It seemed funny to Seth that they had a party just because he got a job. Everybody was telling him they were glad he would be sticking around. Only Theo didn't tell him that, but he also didn't tell him to get the hell out.

Once everyone was gone, they cleaned up together though Theo kept wanting to do it all himself. But even as they worked side by side, Seth couldn't tell where things stood between them.

Then they were sitting at the table in the living room after Ace went to bed and Theo suddenly asked, "Did you have a thing with that college girl you mentioned?"

"What? No. She just showed me how to make that cookie," Seth said, surprised.

"It's none of my business," Theo said with a shrug and turned back to his iPad. But then he put it down and looked lost in thought. "When I was sitting with Ace as he was going to sleep, I put my hand on his hair and I remembered something – how our mom used to smell Ace's head when he was a baby. She would cuddle him and say, 'You got to smell his head. It's the best thing in the world. Better than cookies baking. I swear it.'"

Seth smiled. "She loved you guys like crazy, huh." He looked over at the shelf that held the photo of their mom and dad sitting on a swing on their wedding day. "Your folks make weddings look like fun."

"I guess they can be," Theo said like he didn't feel one way or the other about them.

"I just remember my dad saying weddings are for fools, it's all a big act and a waste of money."

"Do you think that too?" Theo asked him.

"Never really thought about it. I guess they're alright," Seth said, but he was really thinking that they seemed kind of nice, everybody celebrating together, wishing the couple a happy life.

"What about gay weddings?" Theo said reminding him that he thought Seth was prejudiced.

"Aren't they the same as other weddings?" Seth asked. It's not like he knew anything about them. "There's still cake and all that."

"Cake? What are you a kid?"

"Cake is important. Cake with ice cream is even better. That's what I'll have if I ever get married," Seth said and Theo looked like he wasn't sure if he was just messing with him.

For a while Seth didn't say anything and he realized he was just staring at Theo. Looking away quickly, he got up and paced the living room aimlessly. But soon he found himself standing behind Theo, who was sitting at the table with his iPad set aside.

Now Seth was dying to touch his hair, bury his face in it, then pull Theo down to the floor and...

That couldn't happen, not while Theo thought he was no good and only wanting to use him. He had to keep his hands off. But even knowing that it would make Theo think even less of him, it was a struggle against temptation like Seth had never known.

Theo was right there, so close, so beautiful. Not touching him was painful, and still Seth was confused about things. Why were his feelings for Theo so strong?

"I heard about a place in town," he said after taking a few steps back.

Turning around to face him, Theo was confused. "A place?"

"A room I can rent above the hardware store. Now that I have a job..."

Theo stood up angrily. "You have a job, but you're still leaving?" His voice got too loud and they both glanced toward the bedroom where Ace was sleeping.

"I think it's best. I need to stand on my own two feet."

Theo didn't let him say anything more, just walked away.

Chapter 18

Seth didn't sleep much, and in the morning, he was greeted by Theo's glare as he walked into the kitchen. That only made him think how he wouldn't be seeing Theo first thing in the morning and last thing at night any more.

Telling Ace that he was taking the room in Peach Tree was hard. Theo broke the news but then Ace turned his sad eyes on Seth.

"You aren't supposed to leave."

"I'm not moving that far. We'll still see each other," Seth told him but that wasn't good enough. Ace was still sad.

"He's not leaving right now. We're driving into work together," Theo told Ace.

Once they dropped off Ace at school, Seth drove them to work.

"When are you moving?" Theo wanted to know.

"After work today. There isn't all that much to me moving. Everything I got fits in my bag. The room is furnished."

"That's more than you can say for the house. I was going to take Ace to Julian and Rob's after work, but I can do it tomorrow."

"You don't need to change your plans. I can move later," Seth said, but he wasn't dragging his feet and trying to spend more time with Theo. "Do you... I mean. Should I come along and help?"

"You were invited. You can come along if you want," Theo said like it was all the same to him.

"I was thinking to make something, not go empty handed. Maybe some skillet cornbread. It doesn't take long."

"That sounds good."

As they reached the parking lot of the inn, Seth noticed that most of the cars were nice ones and the truck stuck out like a sore thumb. "This truck is an eyesore, isn't it?"

"I usually park on the far edge of the parking lot, over there, behind the delivery vans," Theo told him then eyed him as he parked. "Are you feeling nervous?"

"I admit, this place is scaring me. The tearoom is so fancy."

"Kind of, but you can handle it," Theo told him. "Think about who

goes to the tearoom. It's mostly women who are drawn to it. You're a hunk serving them tea and sweets and finger sandwiches. As long as you're pleasant, you'll do fine."

Did Seth hear him right? "A... hunk?"

Theo rolled his eyes at him. "They won't throw you into the deep end on your first day. You have orientation and training. So try and relax."

Of course Theo was right, but there was so much to learn and Ms Silver was real strict. There was a rule for everything, like where to stand when taking an order and exactly how far, how loud to speak, and that was just the start of it. The next day Seth was going to be learning all about tea – how to serve it and everything else there was to know.

As busy as he was, Seth still managed to sneak a peek at Theo behind the reception desk. He was the picture of a perfect employee – sure of himself and smiling just right. It wasn't a real smile though.

By the end of the day, Seth's poor brain was reeling, and it was a relief to be going home with Theo. Of course he wasn't living there any more, but he got to cook for Theo and Ace one more time.

He made a nice, good sized cornbread real quick and some little corn cakes for Ace. Since they wanted to get going, Theo and Seth decided to eat later.

To get to the house, they drove up the hill, past the peach trees that had only a hint of green buds. "This place is going to be something when all these trees start flowering," Seth said, but when he saw the huge house where Julian and Rob lived, he went speechless.

"Such a big house!" Ace said, amazed.

"Get a load of this place," Seth said as he got out of the truck. "Rob seemed just like a regular guy. I didn't think he lived in a place like this."

"It belonged to Julian's family and the Brenners were seriously rich," Theo said.

"Is that from research?" Seth asked.

"Of course."

Approaching the big front door, they didn't have time to knock before the door opened and Danny and Lenny ran out. "You're here!" Danny said, excited, and Lenny barked and jumped.

Rob and Julian were right behind them, welcoming them and inviting them inside.

"This is an impressive house," Theo said.

"We're still working on making it our own," Julian said leading the way into a huge living room.

"That view is something else," Seth said seeing the sun low in the sky

and the river turning golden under its rays.

"We brought this skillet cornbread for you guys," Theo said while Seth was distracted.

"Oh that looks good," Rob said as he took it.

"Seth made it. He can make anything in a skillet," Ace said.

"What about pizza?" Rob challenged him.

"Can you do pizza?" Ace asked Seth.

"I can give it a shot," Seth said, but he wasn't sure if Theo would let him cook at their place again.

Next they got a look at a library with bookshelves that went on and on.

"So many books!" Ace said.

"I feel like I should be keeping my voice down," Seth whispered then realized he was standing too close to Theo.

"I think this room is bigger than our whole house," Theo said.

"It's crazy isn't it," Rob said. "Danny uses it as a playroom when Julian and I are working." He pointed to their offices next door.

The kitchen was next, and in there Rob offered them some of their old appliances including a toaster oven that was going to come in real handy.

Next they went upstairs to have a look at some of the furniture they were getting rid of. "It's old fashioned, but it's good stuff, totally solid," Rob said as he knocked on the side of a tall, skinny armoire. "This thing is going. You want it?"

"The bedrooms don't have built in closets. If you can spare it, we can use it. Thank you," Theo said. "And I'll owe you for this."

"You're doing us a favor helping us get rid of it," Julian said.

Theo picked out some more furniture, including bed frames, and Rob offered to help them get it all down the stairs.

"You guys hang out and keep Lenny from tripping us up," Rob said to the boys.

Danny jumped to defend his little dog. "Lenny wouldn't do that."

"Of course not. Just keep him with you, please," Julian said.

"We will," Ace told him, taking charge. "You wanna show me your room?"

Danny did. "I have a bee boat bed!"

Ace was confused but decided to roll with it. "Let's see it."

They got the stuff downstairs, and then Theo planned out how they would arrange it all in the back of the truck. While he was figuring it out, Seth went to bring down a chest of drawers. It wasn't very big so

he figured he could do it by himself. It was heavier than he expected. Muscles straining, he managed it then got scolded by Theo.

"Why didn't you wait for me? You could have hurt yourself."

"I just can't help showing off for you," Seth muttered while huffing a little from exerting himself.

Theo stared at him. "You what?"

"Umm. Just a bad habit. Never mind," Seth said, embarrassed.

While Theo, Seth and Rob were stacking furniture in the back of the truck, Julian had the boys help him order dinner. The food was all set up in the dining room by the time the truck was loaded and the furniture tied down.

"I thought we should have something that goes well with your cornbread, so we ordered from L&L barbeque," Julian told them as they went to sit at a big table. "And the kids helped me set the table. Thank you, guys."

Theo smiled at his little brother, but Ace was staring wide eyed at all the food. "It smells so good," Ace gushed.

It was quite a spread, but it was funny to be eating messy food with their hands in such a big, fancy house. During dinner, Theo asked them about their wedding. Julian told them about their plans, but Seth noticed that Rob leaned over and whispered something to Danny.

Danny nodded then he ran off. "I have them!" Danny said running back excitedly with that puny dog at his side.

"Tell them what you have there," Rob said.

"Invitation envelopes," Danny said holding up three fancy looking envelopes.

"We would like you to come to our wedding and help us celebrate," Julian said.

"And we're not taking no for an answer," Rob added.

Seth looked at Theo, who was unsure, but Ace had a yes written all over his face.

"Thank you for inviting us," Theo said. "We're still new here. We weren't expecting..."

"I'll take that as a yes," Rob said, bulldozing right over any uncertainty Theo might have been feeling. Then he turned to Seth. "And that's a yes from you too."

"I could stuff my face with some wedding cake, I suppose," Seth said.

Ace joined in to say, "Me too."

"That's three RSVPs right there," Rob said while Julian smiled and Danny did a little happy dance then got shy and hugged Lenny.

After dinner, it was time for them to go. They all walked out in front together. Seeing how the furniture was stacked in the back of the truck, Julian was impressed.

"I bet you're good at puzzles," Rob said to Theo.

"He is. He's always beating me," Ace complained.

"Ace, bring Butter to visit us," Danny whispered shyly.

"Because she's Lenny's sister," Ace said. "Theo, show Lenny some pictures with Butter."

Theo didn't take that seriously, but then Danny brought Lenny over to him. With a sigh, Theo got out his phone.

"Am I really showing cat pics on my phone to a dog?" he asked.

"It looks like you are," Seth told him.

"Lenny will totally lick your phone if you let him," Rob warned Theo.

Theo pulled his phone away, and Seth got down to pet Lenny.

Danny looked from Seth to Lenny. "You're good friends with Lenny."

"He's a good dog," Seth said and Danny smiled.

Ace turned to Theo. "You say something nice about Lenny so Danny will like you."

Danny now looked up at Theo, waiting.

"He's cute," Theo said and got a nod of approval.

The drive to the house was kind of slow with all the furniture they were hauling, but they got there and started unloading. They were arranging furniture right up until Ace's bedtime. Putting the beds together took the most time. Then later on, Seth helped Theo put away the last of the stuff that went in the kitchen.

"You should take the toaster oven," Theo said.

"You need it more. There's a microwave in the room and a coffeemaker. So I'm all set. And this toaster oven is just the right size to bake up some food for you and Ace."

At that Theo grumbled and looked unhappy, but Seth wasn't sure why. When Theo went to the living room, Seth gave him a little time. Seth was lingering, not wanting to leave yet but he knew he could put it off much longer.

Going to the living room, Seth looked around the furnished space. Theo was sitting on the sofa. It was a small one, just a two-seater, and Seth wouldn't have dared sit on it next to him. He had proved more than once how much trouble he had not kissing Theo when they were all alone and sitting close.

To cut off that train of thought, Seth took in the rest of the new, old things. Theo now had a small desk, just big enough for his laptop and that other one that belonged to his dad plus they had some extra chairs too. That meant those folding chairs could go out on the porch.

"Take a seat. Doesn't look like you'll be moving tonight," Theo said just as Seth was thinking that he should get going.

"I can still..."

"You exhausted yourself lugging furniture, and you have work tomorrow. It's easier if you leave from here," Theo said in that take-charge way of his.

Seth didn't mind it and he liked the idea of staying one more night, but when he didn't say anything, Theo took his silence the wrong way.

"Are you that eager to get out of here?"

"No. But, you know, it's good for you and Ace to each have your own room."

"So you're doing us a favor?"

"No." Seth was just trying to look on the bright side. "I never had a place of my own before, and I won't be that far."

Theo wasn't seeing the bright side though. He was glaring, and Seth had to wonder if Theo might be wishing he had put more miles between them.

Theo sighed and then asked him, "Do you plan to keep standing there all night?"

"No. I should be studying the tearoom menu," Seth said and that gave him an excuse to sit at the table. He got a stack of papers with short and long descriptions and all sorts of extra information if the guests should ask. "Frisee Lyonnaise," Seth pronounced carefully. "They sure have a lot of salads on the menu."

"What did you expect? Steak?" Theo asked.

"No, I was expecting tea. There's all these little sandwiches too with things in them I never heard of."

"You already did this at the café. You learned their menu, didn't you?" Theo pointed out.

"There weren't as many fancy things with fancy names."

"You'll get the hang of it. If you mess up, just give the customer your best, professional smile," Theo advised him.

"Like what you do?" Seth said remembering the smile he had seen him use at work.

"That's my professional smile. You should have one too. Practice it," Theo told him then came to sit across from him at the table.

"A professional smile." Seth tried it, but he knew it came off as weak, nothing like a real smile.

"Think of something nice, something that might make you smile for real."

The first thing that popped into his head was that Theo had pretty eyes. He was looking at them right now so he didn't find it hard to

smile.

But Theo didn't like it. "No. The customers will think you're high."

Seth looked down and his smile was gone.

"Whatever you were thinking of, it was too much. Try for something smaller," Theo told him, but Seth kept thinking of him, different parts of him and how much be liked them. They were all too much and he knew he had to stop thinking about Theo altogether. If all that other stuff was impossible, Seth should be satisfied just to be friends with him.

He thought about other things that might put a smile on his face, but he always added Theo into it. Going fishing... with Theo. A fire in that fireplace... and sitting in front of it with Theo.

Was it like that for everybody when they got off with someone for the first time? For him everything was Theo, and that had to be the reason. Because he was Seth's first experience with sex. That might mean that doing things with someone else would push Theo out of his mind. But Seth couldn't imagine wanting anyone else.

"You've gone serious," Theo said. "Think of cake or puppies or something."

"How's this?" Seth asked as he gave it another shot.

"Should I ask what you were thinking of?" Theo said and gave him a suspicious look.

"Nothing weird. I was thinking about helping to fix the porch then seeing the work all finished," Seth told him.

"And how is that not weird?"

Seth only smiled again. He didn't want to tell Theo that it made him happy because it was something he did for him.

Chapter 19

Theo prided himself on taking his job seriously and not getting sidetracked the way Dustin and Helen did sometimes. And what was he doing now? Looking in the direction of the tearoom constantly and hoping for a glimpse of Seth through the French doors.

A little earlier a great looking guy checked in. He had a guitar case with him, so Theo had to restrain Dustin from pestering him. But the guy was also exactly Theo's type – kind of skinny, with a quirky, eclectic style and a nerdy vibe.

So why didn't Theo have to restrain himself or remind himself to stay professional where this guy was concerned? No, he only had to keep himself in check when it came to Seth.

It didn't work. Theo kept wondering when he would see him outside of work, and thinking of ways to get him to come over and keep him around.

It turned out that Theo didn't have to try very hard. After work and picking up Ace, they all went to Peach Tree for some grocery shopping and to see Seth's room.

The room was above Beatty's Hardware Store, and when they all went inside it there was hardly any space left. There was a decent window with an old curtain. The few pieces of furniture were old and cheap but serviceable. Overall the place was dingy and lonely, but clean. The bed was neatly made, and Theo caught himself staring at it too long.

"Is it comfortable?"

"It's alright," Seth said.

"The house is better," Ace told him with a pout.

"OK, we had a tour. Let's go shopping," Theo said.

At the store, while he was picking up a healthy cereal, Theo saw that Ace and Seth had stopped in front of the boxes of Lucky Charms.

"Lucky Charms is Mom cereal," Ace was telling Seth.

Seth was surprised to hear that. "It is?"

"Mom said it was. That it was only for grown-up moms. Not for us kids. But it's a kids' cereal. Everybody knows that," Ace said like he couldn't believe the whopper Mom told him.

Theo laughed then told Seth, "Mom had a weakness for any kind of

sugary, multicolored cereal, but she didn't want us to eat like that. I usually caught her eating it late at night. If she had it while we were up, Ace would pout at her until she gave him some."

"Can we get it?" Ace asked and since it reminded them both of their mom, Theo couldn't refuse him.

"OK, but it's not for breakfast. It's only for dessert."

"Can we put it on ice cream?" Ace asked. That was something else their mom did.

"Maybe."

They moved off to canned foods where Seth loaded up.

"I have the microwave, so I'm getting a bunch of canned soups. But I wanted to buy some chicken and vegetables and make a real soup at your place. Can I come by?" Seth asked while staring at a can of soup like he wanted to memorize the label.

Theo was surprised that he was asking to come over. Didn't he want to keep his distance? "Tempting me with soup? All right," Theo told him, but he also wondered if Seth thought he still owed them for letting him stay at the house. He hoped that wasn't it.

"Wish the oven worked to make you roast chicken. That was my grandpa's favorite," Seth said as they headed to the produce section.

"Maybe I'll get the oven fixed one of these days. Getting that furniture from Julian and Rob was a big help, plus Mitch gave me a huge break on all the work he did, especially since you helped out."

"That was nothing," Seth said modestly.

"It was a major favor and I appreciate it," Theo told him. He wanted to remind Seth that he did plenty for them already, but it only made him frown.

At the house, Seth and Theo started cutting up the chicken and the vegetables. Working in close quarters with Seth, Theo did notice that he seemed ill at ease sometimes, but didn't try very hard to keep his distance. It was like he was embarrassed but still wanted to stick close. Theo didn't know what to think of his attitude.

When the dinner dishes were cleared, Seth sat at the table again and showed them a brand new deck of cards. Theo recognized the watercolor of Stone Creek Inn on the backs of the cards. "I bought this deck of cards from the inn gift shop to celebrate my new job. Thought we could play."

"Strip poker," Theo whispered to shake him up.

Seth gaped at him and blushed. "I was thinking something we could all play."

They played for Lucky Charms then Ace wanted to build a house of cards. Except he called it a castle of cards.

"That is a better name," Seth agreed and it turned out he had a very steady hand. He and Ace built the castle of cards while Theo stayed at his laptop, but mostly he watched them, amazed at Seth's patience.

At Ace's bedtime, Seth was still there. "You don't have to go, right, Seth?" Ace asked him.

"It's getting late," was all Seth told him.

When Theo got back from seeing Ace off to bed, he had to find Butter. Ace was ready to get out of bed and search for her. Theo knew that Ace slept better if she was with him.

He found her right away and watched Seth pick her up so she wouldn't scratch at a chair leg. "No. We don't scratch up things in here. We want to keep things nice for Ace and Theo." Seth then rubbed his face over the cats back a little and hummed. "You're a sweet one. Ace did good getting you. He sure did."

His voice was deep, his hands slow and gentle as he stroked the cat's fur. Theo almost groaned. He wanted to take the cat's place have Seth murmuring to him, stroking his hand down his back, rubbing his face over Theo's skin and humming his appreciation.

"Ace was missing her," Theo said and took her from him. As he did, his hands brushed over Seth's forearms and he repressed a shudder.

When he got back, he was disappointed to see that Seth was in a rush to leave. Maybe Theo didn't hide his attraction to him well enough.

"I better be going. Thanks for letting me come over," Seth told him at the door, but Theo noticed the truck keys were still on the hook by the door.

"The keys," Theo said holding them out to him, but Seth didn't take them.

"I'll walk it."

"You want to walk back to town in the dark? That doesn't make any sense. Either take the truck or stay the night." Theo hoped staying the night didn't sound like a threat to him.

For a moment Seth was undecided. Did he think Theo was offering him something other than to sleep over? "I'm not up to anything. I won't be jumping you in the night," Theo told him.

"I didn't think that," Seth said and he took the keys from him. Their hands touched and Seth drew back gripping the car keys in a tight grip. "I'll be by in the morning to pick you up."

Watching him leave, Theo felt his heart sink. He pretty much chased him away, didn't he? But it was damn confusing the way Seth acted and the reason he moved out. Theo just couldn't figure him out.

Chapter 20

Seth had the dinner shift on Sunday so he was free to go with Theo and Ace to the Hayes's for lunch. Before anything was settled, Ace showed no doubt that Seth was going with them, so he figured he better not say no. He put on the green sweater Theo bought him and met up with him and Ace.

He wasn't sure how Theo felt about him going along. He was always guarding his emotions, but Seth was still sure that Theo wasn't happy with him. Sometimes it was like he was mad that Seth left, other times it was like he wanted him to leave. But that didn't mean Seth could stay away.

At the Hayes's, everyone greeted them at the door. The dogs got Seth's attention, but he also told Sam how much he was looking forward to seeing how he made pizza from scratch.

The kids went off inside to watch something, and the guys had a look at the herb and vegetable garden. "We'll be using homemade sauce Sam made from the tomatoes he grew right in this garden," Wyatt bragged, and Seth was amazed at how much pride he always showed in Sam.

Going in, they kept talking about food. Sam mentioned zucchini fritters just as little Riley ran over and he made a tragic face.

"Oh, don't panic. We're making pizza," Sam told him and ruffled his hair.

"Ace is being best friends with DJ. They're watching *Ben 10* together," Ry complained.

"You can watch with them too, you know," Sam told him.

"I was watching with them, but now it's a commercial," Riley said.

Both his dads gave him a look, then Wyatt told him, "Better go back before you miss something."

"So little bro is jealous?" Seth said once Riley was gone.

"Boy is he," Wyatt said.

"Were you jealous when your brother played with older kids?" Sam asked him, so Wyatt must have been a younger brother too.

"Oh man, I was such a green eyed little monster. Didn't give him a moment's peace," Wyatt said with a grin.

"I guess you have a possessive streak," Sam said and smiled at him.

"So Riley is feeling excluded?" Theo said. It looked like he was taking it more seriously than Sam and Wyatt did.

"Exclude Ry?" Wyatt thought for a bit. "I doubt that's a thing that can be done."

They all moved into the kitchen as Sam and Wyatt made two pizzas and the rest of them watched, including the kids and the dogs. It didn't take too long since Sam had the dough rising already, but Wyatt made another batch with his help just to show how it was done.

When the pizzas went into the oven, the kids went off to play.

"That was impressive," Theo told Wyatt and Sam.

"Sam taught me everything I know," Wyatt said and put an arm around his husband and pulled him close.

He wasn't shy about showing his love for Sam. They were sure in their love for each other, sure they belonged together no matter how different they were.

"Andiamo ragazzi," Wyatt called out when the pizzas were done.

"He's talking Italian," Ace said as all the kids ran over.

"I teach them a few words now and then," Wyatt said. "I tried German, but it makes Ry crack up. Every time I say something, he ends up rolling on the floor." To show them, Wyatt said a few words in German. Ry started giggling uncontrollably then he rushed at Wyatt and tried to tackle him.

"He's a happy kid," Seth said, smiling at the sight.

"Yeah, I don't know what I was worried about," Theo said.

It turned out that Wyatt knew all those languages because he had lived all over Europe. He told them about it over pizza. "I was happy, but a part of me was lonely too, the part of me that craved family connections and a true, once in a lifetime love." Wyatt smiled at Sam and the boys. Sam returned the smile then leaned over and kissed him.

At that moment, Seth made sure not to look at Theo but he was deeply aware of him.

The guys were talking and the kids were playing with the dogs, when Ry came over to complain some more about DJ and Ace. "I'm cool too. Dads, tell them."

"Is this about Ace and DJ being friends?" Sam asked and got a nod from Ry.

"So you're not friends with Ace?" Wyatt challenged him.

"I'm friends with him," Ry claimed then he ran over to Ace to confirm

it. "You're my friend, right, Ace?"

Ace didn't give him an easy yes. He shook his head. "No. You're my friend," he said then Ry screamed and started chasing him.

As they were both running around and screaming, DJ shook his head. "Being a big brother is hard," he said to Theo and made a very serious face.

"You know it," Theo told him and they high fived.

"They're making friends!" Ry yelled and he and Ace ran over and tried to tackle their big brothers.

Ry did tackle DJ, but Theo had his secret weapon. "I will tickle you," he warned Ace. Stepping away from the roughhousing, he asked Wyatt, "They don't act like that after school, do they?"

"Nah. Homework keeps them busy. DJ and Ace are pretty serious about school. And Ry... Uhh, yeah."

Before they left, Sam printed up a recipe for the pizza he made for Seth. They were off by themselves when Sam told him, "I used to live in that room above the hardware store. That was when I thought the best I could do was just to have a job and a place to live. Then I met Wyatt."

"You two did good finding each other," Seth told him, but he was thinking about Theo. What if he found someone? Could Seth be happy for him?

He was thinking about it that night in that lonely room in Peach Tree. With Theo too damn far away, it was like he could feel the distance between them in every part of him. That constant ache was something he would have to get used to.

Seth had never lived alone before. He always had his grandpa, and then he latched onto Theo and Ace. So far he couldn't say he liked it much, and nights were the worst. In the darkness, his brain turned over questions and came up with no answers.

The biggest question was what did he want. One thing he knew he didn't want was to see Theo with anybody else. But he might find someone the way Sam and Wyatt found each other.

At the inn, Seth had seen a guest flirt with him. The good looking guy only got Theo's professional smile, but it still worried Seth that it would be so easy for Theo to find some other guy.

He was almost asleep when he started thinking about Theo naked pressed up against another man, naked too but kind of invisible like he was mostly in shadow. But when Seth started picturing that man's hands on Theo, he had to push his fingers against his eyelids to make

the vision stop.

Seth's dick was hard but be wanted that other man to stop touching Theo, get his hands off him and go away. That left Theo naked, waiting, needing. Did he need the same thing Seth did?

Seth's hand reached down, pulled his cock out. He stroked it and whispered Theo's name. In his mind, he was doing this to Theo, telling him, "You don't need anyone else. I can take care of you." Seth came much faster that he expected as he pictured how Theo looked as he was coming, as he was telling him, "Seth, you're all I need."

Chapter 21

Home from work, Theo was looking at what to make for dinner, when he heard Ace complaining to Butter. "Seth didn't come over."

"He can't come over all the time," Theo told him.

"When is he going to?" Ace whined.

"I don't know. We'll see," Theo said, not wanting to promise too much. But the deepening frown on Ace's face got him to close the fridge and give up on making dinner. "We don't have to wait for Seth to come by. We can go into town, go to the laundromat and grab some dinner."

Ace didn't get too excited about it yet though. "With Seth?" he asked.

"Yes, if he's free. I'll text him," Theo said.

They agreed to meet at the Peach Tree Café. When Theo and Ace arrived, Seth had already snagged a table for them. Before going to join him, Theo went over to Mrs. Del Rio to introduce Ace to her.

"I heard so much about you, and I'm thrilled to meet you," Mrs. Del Rio said. Then she leaned in to whisper to Theo. "Don't you worry about that Seth getting away from you, sweet cheeks. Wherever he is, he's still your man."

Theo gaped at her but she just winked at him and then gave Seth a little wave.

Going over to their table, Theo was still in a state of disbelief at Mrs. Del Rio's words of encouragement. Then before they could even sit, Seth jumped in to say, "Dinner is on me."

"I invited you," Theo reminded him.

"I used to work here. I want to treat you for old time's sake," Seth said.

Theo didn't find that convincing, but he decided to go along with him. "Alright." Taking a seat, he looked around and wondered if Hannah was there. He didn't see her. A waitress named Magda brought them menus and told them about the special.

"I've got to try that special, pork chops in sticky gravy," Seth said but Ace was still looking at the menu.

They didn't get to go out to eat often so Theo let him take his time. Seth told them their waitress was the one he was filling in for. "She's a go getter. That's what Hannah called her."

Since he brought her up, Theo couldn't help asking, "Have you been spending a lot of time with Hannah?"

"A little bit," Seth said and Theo felt jealous paranoia creeping up on him. Why the hell couldn't he be satisfied to just be friends with Seth?

Even after they put in their orders and were waiting for their food to arrive, Theo was still obsessing about Seth and Hannah, and Ace was looking at the dessert menu.

"They have hummingbird cake. Mom used to make that for your birthday, Theo," Ace said and pushed the menu toward him.

"I loved hummingbirds when I was a kid," Theo told them. "But at first I was afraid they went in the cake. Once Mom told me there were no hummingbirds in the cake, I stopped crying."

Seth cracked up. "Did you really cry?"

"I was four. Cut me some slack," Theo said but Ace looked like he might have lost a little respect for him.

The food was really good, and Ace got to try Theo's ravioli but Seth's sticky gravy was the bigger hit. He was getting hummingbird cake too, but when Mrs. Del Rio delivered it herself, she invited Ace to eat it while touring the kitchen.

"I never got to eat anywhere as nice as this before," Seth said.

"It's a fun place," Theo said as he thought to himself that it worked pretty well for a date night, which this wasn't. This was laundry night and a simple dinner.

"Did you get to go to cool, trendy places with your friends or dates or...?" Seth trailed off like he didn't really want to talk about Theo dating, but he had to wonder if he was thinking about dating because they were alone now.

"I did," Theo told him. "But I had to watch what I ordered. Saving money for me and Ace was always a priority."

"You're doing good now," Seth said, and Theo nodded but not having custody of Ace was always on his mind.

"I got lucky and came across this guy who helped us out a lot," Theo said. From Seth's look, he could tell he didn't know Theo was talking about him. "I was talking about this trespasser who refused to leave. Does that ring a bell?"

Now he got it. "Oh." Seth lowered his head and frowned, turning serious. "I don't want you thinking you owe me."

Theo didn't know why that bothered him. "I owe a lot of people. Like Mrs. Del Rio. And speaking of... I can't believe Ace isn't back yet. How big is that kitchen?"

"It's a good size kitchen, but it doesn't stretch out for miles," Seth told him. "I bet Mrs. Del Rio took a liking to him."

Theo had a different theory about what Mrs. Del Rio was up to especially since she winked at him when she took Ace away.

When they were ready to leave, Ace did appear along with Mrs. Del Rio.

"Have you been hired to work here, Ace?" Seth asked him.

"No, but I got to watch the cooking. They're fast. And when I'm big, Mrs. Del Rio said I can be the boss of everybody."

"You think you can keep up?" Theo asked him.

"Yeah. Theo, I'm fast," Ace said then showed them by running in place.

"Look at him go," Mrs. Del Rio said.

"You made this quite an experience for Ace. Thank you," Theo told her.

"Ace is a delight, and I look forward to seeing you all here again soon."

They left the café with Ace still a little hyper. "We're doing laundry next," Theo said to Seth.

"I can keep you guys company," he offered.

"If you have nothing better to do," Theo told him.

As they went back to the truck to get the bag with the laundry, they ran into the sheriff. As they greeted her, Sheriff Jackson stopped and told Seth, "Mr. Brewer, I understand I'll be seeing more of you around town now that you took the room at Mr. Beatty's."

"Yes, Ma'am," Seth said and she moved on.

The laundromat had some arcade games, and Ace headed straight there. "He's all set," Theo said and went to load the washing machine.

Coming back he sat next to Seth and noticed he seemed a little off. "What's on your mind?" Theo asked as they sat on the plastic chairs. They were the only ones there though some of the other machines were going. Theo had already noticed that people didn't sit to guard their laundry but went off without worrying too much about it.

Seth still lowered his voice as he asked, "You think she was giving me a warning? The sheriff."

"What kind of warning?"

"Like letting me know I'm not welcome here," Seth said.

"No. I think she was just being a cop. We're new here." Theo had already told himself the same thing, but Seth seemed to be way more rattled.

"I didn't tell you everything about how things were back in Waterfield," Seth said.

"You can tell me now if you want," Theo said though he didn't want to push him.

"With my parents being criminals, I didn't know how to stay out of trouble at first. I did stop fighting with the kids at school, learned to always keep my head down and kept to myself. But I got stuck with a bad reputation, and it was like open season on me all the time. It didn't help that I didn't have anyone in my corner. My mom and dad didn't stay in touch. They didn't want to keep explaining why they didn't send for me and why they hardly ever sent any money. The whole time, my grandfather's health was getting worse. I couldn't go running to him with my problems. And since I wasn't telling him my side, he got the idea that I was bringing trouble on myself." Seth took a deep breath and continued. "The sheriff already had me in his sights. Then one night about a year ago, I caught his nephew breaking into my grandpa's house. He pulled a knife on me, and I beat the crap out of him. It was dark. I didn't know who it was. The nephew claimed he was just visiting, that I invited him to watch TV and then attacked him for no reason. The sheriff went with his version of things and hauled me in for assault. With my grandpa the way he was with his Alzheimer's, I was the only witness to what really happened. The sheriff wanted me to take the fall, but it turned out his nephew had other burglary charges against him. The D.A. saw through the whole thing and dropped the charges against me. After that the sheriff had it in for me worse than ever."

"That's why you had to leave your home town," Theo said. He hated that Seth had to go through all that, but he tried to set his feelings aside and started thinking it through. "OK. I don't think this sheriff has it in for you. But it is possible she checked up on you and got an earful from the sheriff in Waterfield."

"So I can expect trouble here too," Seth said looking forlorn.

Theo shook his head. "I can't be sure, but I didn't get that impression. Let me check something." Theo got out his phone and dialed. "Hi, Wyatt. Hope this isn't a bad time. What kind of person is Sheriff Jackson?"

Wyatt answered straight away. "She's smart, fair, good at her job." He didn't ask why Theo wanted to know.

"That's good to hear. Thank you. I'll let you go now," Theo told him.

Seth was staring at him in disbelief. "You just..."

He didn't finish so Theo went with what he had to say. "From what Wyatt said, the sheriff here isn't likely to be easily fooled. I don't think you should worry too much about her hassling you for no reason."

Seth still looked uneasy.

"Living here, you're going to see the sheriff pretty often. Maybe you should consider moving back." Theo couldn't believe he said that. He was just using Seth's anxiety about the sheriff as an excuse to invite him back, and he was hoping he was going to say yes.

"I would be crowding you," Seth said. "And maybe I don't have any reason to worry here. But thank you for offering. I was afraid you might think I had to be guilty of something if the sheriff had it in for me."

"I don't," Theo told him. He should have some doubts about Seth, but he didn't. He had a strong impression that Seth wasn't used to being trusted or worried about. He was always thinking about what Ace and Theo needed, and at the same time, claiming he was fine and didn't need anything. "I might be mad at you, and I don't understand you sometimes, but I know you're a good guy at heart."

At that Seth smiled. His eyes were shining. His smile was bright and warm, and Theo had to clench his fists or he would have grabbed him and kissed him for all he was worth.

Chapter 22

Being away from Theo and Ace wasn't getting any easier. When he saw Theo at work it only made it harder for him to be alone when he went to his room, but that's how it had to be. He had to have some independence so Theo wouldn't think everything he did was so he could stay with him and Ace.

That didn't mean Seth could keep away from Theo. Seeing him at the inn just wasn't enough. Those were just glimpses while he was talking to guests or other people working there.

Theo's hair was tied back at work, and it looked good and all, but he was more himself when his hair was free. When he wasn't working, Theo didn't smile as much, but Seth liked his serious eyes and that he only smiled when he wanted to.

What he saw at the inn was Theo's professional face and professional smile, and he wanted the real man. Even if Theo scorned him and doubted him, Seth still couldn't go without seeing him.

Saturday, Seth had a day off, the weather was nice so he got himself over to Theo's and got to work on clearing the driveway. Theo had to work but he had Ace to help him out.

Theo did try to stop Seth, telling him, "It's your day off, and you want to do hard labor?"

"I'm keeping in shape," Seth said, but Theo didn't buy it.

Once Theo went off to work, Seth and Ace got to work digging up and pulling out bushes. Ace actually had fun with it, yelling every time they yanked out a bush by the roots.

By the time Theo came back, they had made the driveway look more like a driveway. "Looks good. Did you guys have lunch?"

"I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich," Ace said then he tattled on Seth. "Seth didn't have anything. He was all, 'I'm good. I wanna keep working.'"

Seth laughed while both brothers shook their heads at him. He wanted to do as much as he could before Theo got back. Like always, Seth was looking to impress him.

"I'll make us lunch," Theo said.

"Can we eat at the picnic table?" Seth asked. As dirty as he was, he hated to go inside. "I stink pretty bad."

"I was helping. I stink too." Ace then raised his arms. "Smell me, Theo."

"No, thank you. But you can go wash your hands and face," Theo told him.

Theo put together some ham sandwiches with lots of lettuce inside. But when he brought them out Ace scowled.

"You made the sandwiches green," Ace said as they all sat down.

"You need to eat healthy, so you get salad in your sandwich and that's whole wheat bread," Theo told him.

"The bread is OK, but there's too much salad in the sandwich," Ace objected.

"No, it's good," Seth told him after taking a big bite. "There's still mayo on it. I think it's a fine sandwich."

"OK," Ace said and ate it grudgingly at first but then saw it wasn't so bad.

"Healthy tastes good too, remember that," Theo lectured him.

"I think the driveway used to be edged with rocks, but they got scattered. I was thinking of putting them back and gathering some more that are just lying around," Seth said to Theo.

"You want to do more work?"

"I like seeing a job finished. And there's still more bushes to pull up," Seth told him.

Theo looked like he might try to stop him, but then he gave up. "I guess I better roll up my sleeves too."

With the two of them working together, they moved fast until they only had one big, stubborn bush left. There seemed to be no end to its roots. Seth was thinking they might need to use the truck to get it out, but first he wanted to give it one more try.

"You stand clear, Ace," Seth warned him as he and Theo took hold of the thickest branches and started pulling. They were right next to each other giving it their all, and Seth started to feel the roots coming loose. Then just as they got them half out, Seth's foot slipped. He was falling to one side with his foot sliding toward Theo. He was going to bring Theo down with him. Seth wasn't going to let it happen. He twisted away from him. Theo stayed on his feet, but Seth landed funny and felt a pain in his ankle.

"Seth! No! You got hurt," Ace yelled, looking scared as Seth hissed at the pain.

"Oh, it's nothing. If I get up all right, you can go ahead and laugh at me," Seth said but Theo stopped him from getting up.

"No. Stay put," Theo told him and kneeled next to him. "Did you fall the other way so you wouldn't trip me up?"

"Just a little," Seth said then he winced as Theo helped him move his foot. "That's not so bad."

"You hurt your ankle," Theo said. "It looks like a sprain, but you should have it looked at."

"No. As long as I can move it, the damage isn't that bad," Seth told him and showed him.

"OK, OK. Don't push yourself. Let's get you up carefully." Theo pulled Seth's arm over his shoulders and hoisted him up.

"I wanted to help," Ace complained while Theo kept a tight hold of Seth as he stood on one leg and tested out if his other leg could hold him up.

"I think I can limp on it," Seth decided.

"OK, Ace, you can help," Theo told him. He then looked toward the porch and told Seth his plan. "I want to keep working. You can sit on the porch and rest your ankle, and I can keep an eye on you? Ace, go unfold one folding chair."

"I can just sit on the porch steps," Seth said, but Ace was already running to do what his brother said.

In the meantime Theo took his time getting Seth over to the porch. "I can't believe you got yourself hurt just so I wouldn't get hurt. Damn it," Theo grumbled as they went, then he corrected himself. "I mean, thank you."

"It wouldn't be right for me to let you get injured because of me," Seth told him.

Theo still looked unhappy with him. And when Seth looked up, he saw that Ace looked mad at him too.

"Guess I got myself in trouble with Ace," Seth said, and Ace confirmed it.

"You did. You are not allowed to get hurt." Ace made a fierce face at him.

"Sorry," Seth told him but he was touched at how much he cared.

The porch steps were a struggle, and Seth leaned on Theo heavily. His hold was comforting even if he did glare at Seth worriedly as he helped him sit down.

"How's that?" Theo asked after he had Seth settled into the chair.

"Not bad, but I'm useless just sitting here."

Theo leaned over him to stare sternly into his eyes. "You're letting that ankle heal, and don't you even think of getting up without me here to help you."

"Yeah!" Ace added on top of his brother's warning then he stomped away, ready to help Theo.

It was kind of fun to watch them work together, Ace always trying to do too much. Butter came over to climb all over Seth, but some petting got her to curl up on his lap.

"I've been feeling real lazy watching you guys working hard," Seth said when Theo and Ace came over. They were done for the day and ready to go in, but first they had to get their sneakers off.

"Am I paying you for all this hard work you're doing?" Theo asked Ace.

"I don't know," Ace said but looked hopeful.

"I could pay you in brownies," Theo offered.

"Yay!" Ace said, running inside.

"Brownies?" Seth said.

"The oven is fixed. Finally." Theo pulled him up to stand, and Seth couldn't help but enjoy the contact between them. "Now I'm the one who stinks," Theo said.

"You smell fine," Seth told him and Theo gave him a sideways look.

"I'm thinking about removing a few of these bushes near the house, but some of them might be plants we want to keep. I just can't tell yet," Theo said as they slowly went inside.

"Spring is coming. I see plenty of buds. When the leaves and flowers come out, you'll be able to tell what's what," Seth told him. "There might be a whole garden hiding out here."

Making sure Seth was sitting down on the couch, Theo went to take a quick shower. He expected Seth to keep sitting there even after he got back and went to the kitchen, but Seth couldn't sit still. He limped into the kitchen where Ace was feeding Butter, and Theo was looking into the fridge.

"You're a bad patient," Theo told Seth as he came in and Ace huffed at him.

"I'm gonna bring Seth a chair," Ace said. "I'm the chair guy."

Opening the oven door, Seth leaned down to peer inside though there wasn't anything to see. He straightened and bit his lip. "Uh. Can I... can I bake something in it?" He was inviting himself to stay and cook dinner, but it wasn't the first time. "I want to make you roast chicken, but for now I could just bake up some pasta."

"You're hurt. I'm making baked pasta. Red sauce or mac and cheese?" Theo asked.

Ace had an answer for him as he dragged in a chair for Seth. "Red sauce."

"There'll be cheese either way," Theo said. "And I finally get to make some brownies."

"Make them in a skillet," Ace said and Theo stared at him.

"We have a working oven now."

Sitting and watching Theo cook, Seth kept wanting to jump up and help, but he knew better than to try it. As it was, he was getting warning looks from both Theo and Ace if he so much as shifted in the chair.

When Ace was out of the kitchen, Theo told Seth, "I hope you know you're staying here tonight."

"I don't want to crowd you guys," Seth said.

Theo sighed. "You're not going to try and argue with me?" Theo said and shot him a glare over his shoulder.

"I guess not," Seth said.

Ace came through the kitchen again to see if Theo was making the brownies yet. "The pasta is in the oven. I'm starting the brownies now. And Seth is staying over."

"Oh yeah!" Ace did a little dance.

"Are you celebrating the brownies or that Seth got hurt?" Theo asked him.

"Not that he got hurt, but Seth is here, and that's good," Ace said.

Spending the evening with Theo and Ace always reminded Seth how much he wanted to stay with them all the time. Tonight was no different.

Working outside got Ace to go to sleep right at his bedtime. "Out like a light," Theo said as he came to the living room and sat next to Seth on the small couch.

"I can stay out here tonight," Seth said.

"No. You need to lie down properly." Theo gestured to his ankle.

"I don't want to push you out since you're moved into the other room now," Seth said though he couldn't help thinking about sharing the room with him.

"I haven't been using that room much. I'm still staying with Ace most of the time. Sometimes he has nightmares if I'm not there to wake him. He isn't over everything that happened when he was living with our aunt. Some stuff that happened with her and her boyfriend."

"I'm sorry to hear that. He seems like a happy kid most of the time," Seth said. "I hate to think about Ace being scared, having nightmares like that. I had them when I was a kid."

"What were they about?" Theo asked.

"I had nightmares about being thrown in jail like my folks, and nightmares about my grandpa driving away in his truck and me running after him yelling, begging him to come back or to take me with him. Not to leave me."

"Sorry," Theo said. "When Ace has nightmares I try to remind him of good times with our parents. I show him videos and play Dad's music.

I just wish we had more from that time. I..." Theo stopped, and his expression was so sad Seth couldn't let him go silent.

"What is it?"

"We lost our parents so losing things that remind me of them, that I could share with Ace..." Theo trailed off but then continued. "Whenever Dad would go to the store, he'd buy some little thing for Mom, just silly things that they put by the registers. Dad would give them to her and she loved them. Sometimes it was candy then she would eat it all sneaky. I told you she had a raging sweet tooth. She kept a whole box of little things Dad had bought her. Once she was gone, I wanted to keep those things, but our aunt threw it out while we were at school. Like it was garbage."

"That had to be hell for you." Seth could see it on his face.

"Hell. That's about right. I wanted to scream at her and cry, but Ace was already crying, and for his sake, I had to act like it was all right."

Without even thinking, Seth took his hand. "The most important thing is that Ace has you." Tightening his hold on Theo's hand, Seth drew him closer and put an arm around him. "Is this OK?"

"It's more than OK," Theo told him and leaned his head on Seth's shoulder.

They stayed like that for a little while with Seth not daring to move an inch. When Theo pulled away, Seth didn't want to let him go, but he knew it would be wrong to offer him comfort and then ask for more.

It wasn't long before Theo decided to go to bed. First he helped Seth get up, and his touch was like fire that wouldn't go out.

A little later, sitting on the bed, Seth was surprised to see Theo at the bedroom door. "I have my stuff here. I wanted to get something to sleep in," Theo said as he came in.

Having him there, Seth was yearning to tell him how much he thought about him, how much he wanted to be with him all the time, that it hurt not to see him.

"Theo. I know I don't always do the right thing with you. I can't help what I feel," he started to say, but Theo shook his head.

"Don't give me excuses."

If he didn't want to hear it then Seth wasn't going to say it. But maybe he could show him. As Theo passed by him, Seth grabbed his hand.

"Can you stay?" Seth asked, looking up into his beautiful, dark eyes. With only the light from the hallway shining in them, Theo's eyes were unreadable to him.

Afraid to breathe, waiting for the answer, Seth didn't let go of his

hand.

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His hand in Seth's, the way Seth was looking up at him, Theo didn't have the will to move. But he had to. Freeing his hand Theo went to the door and shut it then locked it.

"Thank God. I thought you were leaving," Seth said.

Theo turned to him but couldn't see him clearly. The only light came from the new window. It wasn't much, but Theo didn't have any trouble finding his way back to Seth. He placed his hands on Seth's shoulders, but he wasn't sure what to do next.

Feeling Seth pulling away from him, Theo asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want light," Seth told him and he tried to get up.

Theo didn't let him though. "What for?"

"I like looking at you."

His words made Theo's breath hitch in his throat, but he remembered his ankle. "Stay put. I'll turn the light on."

The lamp was on and Theo was back standing by Seth's bed. With more light to see by, Theo knew what he wanted. "Arms up," he said and took off Seth's hoodie then the t-shirt he had on underneath. Seth's bare chest held his gaze too long, but it was so gorgeous and Theo was glad the light was on. His eyes moved to his abs, then to the erection tenting his sweatpants. Somehow he managed to remember to be careful with Seth's sprained ankle.

"Get comfortable," Theo told him.

Already flushed with desire, Seth nodded and pulled himself up to lie on the bed. Theo wanted his sweats off but couldn't just follow his instinct to yank them off. Carefully, he slid them down Seth's powerful legs then dropped them off the side of the bed. His boxers were next, but Theo didn't rush. He pulled the waistband down first and watched his cock pop free. At the sight, his mouth watered.

"I'll come if you keep looking at me like that," Seth warned him in a husky voice.

"No, you won't," Theo said, but now he hurried and dragged Seth's boxers over his thighs then more slowly the rest of the way so he wouldn't hurt him.

With Seth's eyes on him, Theo climbed on the bed and kneeled next to him. Seth sat up and put his arm around Theo's waist to draw him closer until Theo was straddling him.

"Can we kiss?" he asked.

Theo didn't say anything just inclined his head. Their lips sealed over one another, their tongues danced. Seth gripped him hard, kissed him deeper until he couldn't breathe. The fervor of Seth's kiss shocked

Theo. Seth couldn't want him this much, could he?

Sliding his hands under Theo's clothes, Seth surged against him all muscle and need. He stripped Theo out of his clothes kissing him the whole time – his mouth, his neck, down his arms all the way to his fingertips.

Theo was losing it, his skin hot and alive begging for more of Seth's touch. Grabbing him and kissing his mouth, Theo pushed his fingers through Seth's hair then down his back. Theo tried to hold off, to not show him his hunger, his bottomless need, but it was no use. He was shaking, panting Seth's name.

Hands skimming over the ridges of his abs, he reached for Seth's cock. He started stroking and Seth moaned against his neck. Theo pressed him down with a kiss until he was flat on the bed.

His hand was still busy on Seth's cock, but he needed more. Dying to lick and suck, Theo wet his lips and shifted lower and leaned down to his cock.

First he flicked his tongue over the tip and made Seth pant. Theo licked his way down the shaft to gently suck his balls. He then worked his way back up, taking it slow as he licked every inch. But he knew he couldn't hold back much longer.

Seth's balls cupped in his hand, Theo sucked on the head then let Seth's cock enter his mouth partway. Pulling back, he went deeper and sucked harder each time.

Moaning his name, Seth pushed Theo's hair back and played with it while he sucked. Theo bobbed on his cock faster and Seth's breathing grew ragged. Seth's fingers in Theo's hair gripped harder, and Theo moaned around his cock and sucked him so hard.

He felt Seth tense, groan his name and then spill down his throat with a shudder. Theo swallowed while Seth mussed his hair and rubbed the back of his neck.

He sat up and pulled Theo up then pushed him down. "I need... I need you," Seth groaned then he was on his knees pressing his face against Theo's naked thigh. Looking up, he begged Theo with his eyes. Theo couldn't believe how desperate he seemed.

Flushed, breathing hard, Seth bit his lip, and Theo shivered and grunted as Seth took hold of the base of his cock. Soon Seth was licking and moaning around his cock like Theo's cock was his dream.

Seth's sucking was eager and deep like he wanted to swallow Theo whole and devour his soul. He had Theo coming, rising off the bed to fill his mouth with come. As Seth swallowed, Theo moaned and stroked his handsome face.

Theo felt so good and also tired, but he fought to keep his eyes open as Seth kissed his face all over. When Theo started to sit up, Seth encircled his waist and asked, "Can you stay a little longer?"

Theo didn't have the willpower to resist. "OK, but we can't be naked."

Once he got Seth to let him go and they were both decent, Theo climbed back into the warm bed. Seth covered him up and said, "You make me forget it's still cold."

"Your ankle OK?" Theo asked as they lay side by side.

"Oh it's fine," Seth said like he wasn't thinking about it at all as he gazed at Theo.

Noticing how long Seth stared at him, he had to ask, "What are you doing?"

"Looking at you," Seth said.

"And what do you see?"

"You and you are beautiful," Seth told him.

Theo barely opened his mouth to protest when Seth kissed him and wouldn't stop kissing him.

"You planning to let me get any sleep?" Theo asked when he finally managed to get a breath.

"No," Seth said then he relented. "OK, but I'm going to have to hold onto you."

"Fine," Theo said like he minded. He turned on his side and Seth wrapped his arms around him from the back.

"Your hair is tickling me," Seth said.

Theo expected him to move back, but he moved closer. Seth buried his face in Theo's hair and then he sort of moaned. The sound and the vibration in Seth's chest went through him and drew a shiver. "You cold?" Seth asked and held him tighter.

Theo couldn't believe how good it was to have those muscle-bound arms around him and to feel Seth breathing against him, the rise and fall of his chest, the rhythm of it soothing, comforting, a constant reminder that he wasn't alone.

Chapter 23

Seth felt something wonderful as the pale light of dawn came through his eyelids. It was Theo waking him with a blowjob. The suction and heat threatened to send Seth over the edge before he was even awake. He wanted to beg Theo to slow down, but all he could do was stifle his moans as he came.

Then he realized Theo was getting up, and Seth took hold of his arm to stop him. "Don't rush off. I want to return the favor."

"I don't need any favors. I just did what I felt like doing," Theo said and shook off his hand.

"So you won't let me?" Seth asked, his chest hurting from the rejection.

Taking a moment, Theo turned back to him and said, "I could be talked into it."

Leaning in, looking into Seth's eyes, Theo barely touched his lips to Seth's like he was reminding him how good they felt, how soft and perfect and how much Seth loved having them on his cock and kissing them.

Seth rose into the kiss and Theo pulled back. "You like it when I kiss you more than I expected," Theo said. Staring at his lips then his eyes, Seth was confused, breathing hard, still straining after that kiss.

"Here, since you like it so much," Theo said and he kissed Seth again through the sound of his moan.

Arms tight around him, Seth brought him down then bent over his cock. He didn't take his time like he wanted to, just sucked the life out of Theo.

After he had him satisfied, Seth looked at Theo sprawled on the bed, such a perfect sight. Looking up at him, Theo hooked an arm around his neck then pulled Seth down on top of him for a kiss.

It was Sunday morning and Theo was going to work and Seth got to stay at the house with Ace.

"Look at how Theo has his hair for work," Ace said as Theo was finishing his coffee in the kitchen. Theo usually tied it after he got to work, but this morning he already had it up.

Seth had seen it tied back before but now he looked at the floor as he said, "It looks cute."

"Cute," Ace said looking from Seth to his brother. "Theo, tie my hair."

"You're always copying me," Theo teased him.

"It's allowed. You're my brother," Ace said then he ran to get a hair tie, and Theo tied his hair too. That made the little guy stomp around, preening. He then turned to Theo and Seth. "Be real with me. Do I look good?" he asked.

"Stunning," Theo told him.

"You look good," Seth told him more seriously, but he couldn't keep his eyes off Theo or stop thinking about kissing his neck.

He was still staring at Theo as Ace ran outside to see what Butter was up to and to show her his hair. Since they were alone, Seth wondered if he could kiss Theo, or if he should just settle for gazing at him and not risk getting a brush off.

He finally looked away from Theo when he got a text. "Hannah is coming over. I told her about my ankle."

"To nurse you back to health?" Theo said, sounding mad.

"I don't think so. She's just being nice and visiting me. You don't want her dropping by?" Seth asked.

"I don't care." Theo turned away with a shrug, but then he wheeled on Seth. "I want to know. Were you thinking about her when I sucked you off?"

Why would Theo even ask him that? "No. I wasn't thinking about anything. I was just watching you and memorizing and..."

"Damn it," Theo breathed out the words as Seth looked down. He couldn't look at Theo just then, not even to see if he was still mad. Maybe he didn't want Seth to remember every second so well, but the memory of Theo was making him hard even now.

"So you were only thinking about me?" Theo said and Seth looked up at him.

"Yes. Only you. I don't know why you would say I was thinking about Hannah. I'm not interested in her like that," Seth told him.

Theo frowned. "Really? She made it sound like there was something going on between you."

"She's a friend, nothing more." Seth couldn't tell if Theo believed him.

Before he could find out, Ace ran in and Theo looked at the time. "I have to be going. Ace, make sure Seth doesn't do any work."

"I'll watch him," Ace promised.

When he left, Theo didn't seem too mad, but Seth was still going to find out what Hannah had been up to. When she arrived by herself, Ace was disappointed she didn't bring Shawn with her.

"I'm on my way to work. I can't lug him with me everywhere," Hannah told him.

"OK. I'm gonna let you pet Butter, but next time, bring Shawn," Ace

told her.

"He's cute," Hannah said after Ace went off with Butter. "How's your leg?"

"Fine. I want to know why you made Theo think we had a thing going on?" Seth asked her. Since she was on her way to the café, he didn't want to waste any time beating around the bush.

"I just didn't want him taking you for granted," she said, not batting an eye.

"So you lied to him."

"I hinted and implied and let him get the wrong idea. I did not lie," she claimed.

"You're giving me a headache, girl. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about you. You hardly say two words and when you do, it's Theo, Theo, Theo, like he's your everything."

"That's not true," Seth said but he had a feeling that maybe it was. "Why should it matter to you anyway?"

"I'm just a good friend like that," Hannah said. "I got to go now. You stay off that leg and make sure Theo treats you right."

Staring after her, Seth couldn't believe how brazen she was. Of course he was too. He knew he was pushing his luck when he asked Theo to stay last night, and it paid off. Seth got to spend the whole night with him. That didn't mean Hannah did right.

She did get a rise out of Theo doing that. Did that mean something? Did Theo feel anything like what Seth felt for him?

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All day at work, Theo's mind was drifting back to being in bed with Seth, to Seth's hands on him gentle and warm, the way those dark blue eyes were drinking him in. It all felt so good that the voice in his head that told him it was a bad idea was just a weak whisper drowned out by the memory of Seth's low moans.

When it was time for him to go home, Theo got such a happy feeling, it was embarrassing. And finding out Seth wasn't into Hannah felt better than it should too.

At home, Theo decided to go ahead with Seth's plan to edge the driveway with stones, but he had to keep him from helping. By dinnertime, he was tired and ready for some leftovers, but when he got into the kitchen he found that Seth was baking something.

"It's just some roasted vegetables to go with the leftover pasta. You didn't let me help outside so I had to keep myself busy," Seth told him.

Theo shook his head. "It smells good. I'm going to take a shower then we'll eat."

As he went, he heard Ace whining, "Why did you make vegetables, Seth?"

When dinner was over and Ace was in the living room, playing Dad's video game, Seth started talking about going to his room in town.

"You're not going back to that room and climbing stairs," Theo told him, getting mad despite himself. He was doing dishes and Seth was helping despite his sprained ankle.

"I'm not that bad. It just hurts a little," Seth told him.

"You'll be on your feet all the time at work. You can't risk aggravating your ankle unnecessarily. Just stay with us," Theo told him and tried to keep the edge out of his voice.

"No, I..."

Hearing him refuse again, Theo couldn't stay calm. "Are you afraid of what people will think if you stay here?"

The question confused Seth. "People? What? No."

"Isn't that why you moved out?" Theo asked.

"No. It's not. The reason I..." Seth hesitated and looked at a plate in his hand.

"What?" Theo demanded when Seth didn't finish.

Taking a deep breath, Seth came out with it. "It was because you didn't trust me."

"What are you talking about?"

Seth's gaze was solemn as he looked right at Theo. "I know you were only keeping me around because you thought you owed me."

Theo couldn't believe it. Did he have it wrong all this time? "Are you telling me you're not afraid people will think you're gay?"

"I'm not."

"Does that mean you're gay or bi?" Theo asked as he tried to figure him out.

"I don't think I'm bi," Seth said uncertainly and Theo frowned.

"Are you straight?"

Seth shook his head. His voice was low and husky as he said, "I can't be. I only ever think about you."

Theo was stunned by that. "What about girls?"

"No. Like I said, it's been just you. I've never been with anybody else."

No wonder Seth sounded unsure. If he had more experience... Theo didn't want to think about Seth with anyone else, but he did want to get his living situation settled.

"Then there's no reason you can't move back in. You see that things are better when you're here," Theo told him.

"I thought you wanted me gone. You acted like it sometimes."

"No, I was just pissed at you because I thought you were ashamed of living with a gay guy. Sorry. So will you come back?"

Seth blinked a few times then he smiled. "Only if I can pay rent."

"All right. What about the room in Peach Tree? Did you sign a rental agreement?" Theo wondered.

"No. It's just week to week. Mr. Beatty called it a short term rental."

"OK. It's good to have you back," Theo said. He was feeling so happy and he couldn't wait to give Ace the good news.

That night Theo didn't go to Seth's room. He was dying to, but he didn't know where things stood, how Seth really felt. It seemed to Theo that Seth didn't have his own sexuality fully figured out. That's why he made a suggestion before he went to bed.

"When you ankle is fully healed, we should have a night out. There's a club in Millford. They have an under 21 night. What do you say? You want to go clubbing?"

"You and me together?" Seth asked and got a nod from him. "Yeah. OK."

He made it sound like he didn't really care about going clubbing. It was almost like he only said yes because they were going someplace together.

The next day, Theo had gone to get Seth's things from the room above the hardware store and he went shopping at the same time. At the store, the candy displayed by the register reminded him how Ace had grabbed for the gummy worms to share with Seth. Then Theo thought about how Dad used to buy all those little random things for Mom. Thinking about how Seth was back living with them, Theo's hand reached out for one of the Peach Tree key chains.

Back at the house, Theo was putting away the groceries and Seth came into the kitchen. "Catch," Theo told him and sent the keychain sailing through the air.

"What's this?" Seth asked as he caught it.

"Something to stick the house key on," Theo told him like it was no big deal, but it kind of was. Seth living with them didn't feel like an arrangement that might end any day now. Not that it would last. Things were just a little more settled.

Theo had also gotten a chocolate flavored protein bar for Ace.

Ace read the label. "Muscle Power Bar. Is this gonna give me big muscles?"

"They'll be huge," Theo told him.

As Ace ran off to eat it, Theo noticed that Seth was just standing there staring at the key chain with its metal cutout of a peach.

"Thanks for this," Seth said.

"It's not a big deal," Theo told him but he could see that Seth was touched. "I got you guys ice cream sandwiches too, and a roast chicken for dinner."

As they were setting the table, Ace was flexing in front of the mirror they got from the thrift store.

"Should I act like I don't see that?" Seth asked Theo. Before he could answer, Ace ran over and flexed for them.

"Theo, Seth, look at my muscles."

"I'm impressed," Seth said. "You're looking ripped."

Now Ace wanted to high five, and he really swung for it.

"Oof," Seth said as Ace slapped his hand extra hard. "That packed a wallop."

"I'm too strong now," Ace said.

"You strong enough to get this cat off my chair?" Theo asked him.

"She's just keeping it warm for you," Seth said. He was smiling at Theo, but then he quickly turned away.

Theo couldn't help remembering how Seth said he only thought of him. He didn't know what that meant, how deep it went. And if he was honest, he was kind of afraid to find out.

That night, Theo noticed that the iPod with Dad's music was still charging on the desk. Ace had gone to sleep without it. Theo turned it on.

From the sofa, Seth asked him, "Is that your dad's music?"

"Yeah. It goes from Grandmaster Flash to Lupe Fiasco." He then picked a song. "This one was one of Dad's favorites. "Now That We Found Love" by Heavy D. & The Boyz. Me and Mom and Dad used to dance to it."

"You guys had fun, huh."

"Yeah. I'm always wishing that Ace could remember Dad. How his voice would just wrap around you, soothing and warm. It's not the same to hear it in videos. It's not like when I would hear his voice in my ear, sitting on Dad's lap while he was doing something on the computer." Theo smiled thinking of it. "The way he would let me climb in his lap like I could never be bothering him, not even when I got squirmy and bugged him with questions."

"I bet he liked teaching you stuff," Seth said.

"He did. Then I would get like Ace, and go bragging to Mom about

how smart I was."

"It's hard to believe you were like Ace," Seth said.

Theo grumbled. "Because I'm a grouchy grouch? Even Butter thinks I'm a grouch," he said pointing at her on Seth's lap.

"She doesn't mind you," Seth said and he combed his fingers through her fur.

"And what about you?" Theo couldn't help asking.

"I don't mind you," Seth said but he kept his eyes on the cat. "But for a smart guy you sure misunderstand me a lot. That's my doing 'cause I don't know how to say things the right way."

"No, it isn't you," Theo said and he sat down next to him. "I didn't used to be like this, but dealing with my aunt, I learned to expect the worst from people."

"Sorry," Seth said and touched his knuckles to Theo's.

"No. I'm sorry. Until her, I didn't have any experience with how bad people can disappoint you. After losing Dad then Mom, the way she treated us hit me hard. I got cynical."

"You're not that way with Ace. That's what matters," Seth told him.

"My aunt failed us, that means I can't let Ace down. I can't," Theo said.

"You're doing good, Theo," Seth told him.

"I still need to do better."

Seth reproached him with a smile, "You're too hard on yourself." He placed Butter on Theo's lap. "Show her some love."

That made Theo think that he would rather get his hands on Seth and show him some... He stopped at the next word, stopped himself from making any moves.

Why couldn't he just keep things easy between them, get each other off, not worry about any deeper feelings? But it was like he already crossed some kind of line and got too close to Seth without even realizing.

Chapter 24

Theo wasn't sure when he and Seth would be able to go to the club until Julian and Rob invited Ace to a cake tasting and a sleepover they were having for the kids. That decided it.

Ace was already at their house along with Butter because Danny had asked him to bring her. Theo was helping Seth get ready for their night out. He gave Seth one of his own tshirts to wear, and he smiled as he put it on. But looking in the mirror, Seth started pulling on it.

"It's tight," he said.

"Yes, it is, and that makes it just right," Theo told him. It was dark blue like his eyes and it stretched across his powerful chest perfectly.

"If you say so," Seth said. For now he was willing to go along with Theo.

"Your leg is all better, right?" Theo asked as they set off. He didn't see any sign of a problem, but they could always take it easy.

"It's all good now. And they gave me my final test at the tearoom. Andy's great-aunts came by and they put me through the wringer. But I did OK."

"OK? They were gushing about you so much they embarrassed Andy."

"Umm. And that's good?" Seth asked.

"Yes. You have their seal of approval."

As they were driving down the dark road, Seth looked toward Peach Tree Hill. "I bet Ace is having fun at that cake tasting."

"They got the idea when they did a tasting to choose their wedding cake." Theo looked at Seth out of the corner of his eye. "Don't tell me you would rather go to that?"

"No," Seth said unconvincingly.

"What is it with you and cake?" Theo wondered.

"And ice cream," Seth added. "Just something I remember from when I was little. At every birthday party for every kid I knew, they had cake and ice cream, but that kind of thing stopped for me after my parents went to prison. I guess I just didn't get my fill."

"Then we'll have to treat you to some," Theo said with a smile.

Seth smiled too. "Are you gonna dance tonight?"

"Sure, and you will too."

"Only if you promise not to make fun of me," Seth told him.

"No promises."

The drive took a while but they arrived at the club at a good time. Since the truck didn't make the best impression, Theo parked a few

blocks away and they walked to Club Nuevo. The stairs leading down were dimly lit then the door opened and the music got loud. Going inside, Seth took a step back as he was hit by the flashing lights and the pounding beat.

Theo urged him forward with a hand on his lower back and grabbed some sodas at the bar. He picked a spot that gave them a good view of the dance floor. After they had a look around the place, Seth leaned in to speak in Theo's ear.

"I thought..." Seth started then he looked unsure so Theo prompted him.

"What?"

Seth shook his head. "I thought you were taking me to a gay club."

"There are gay people here. There is a gay bar, but it's over 21." Theo pointed out some gay guys hanging out together and a few lesbian couples among all the straight seeming people.

Seth accepted his answer, but actually Theo wanted to bring Seth to a place where he could choose between girls or guys. "See anything you like?" Theo asked him but Seth just kept staring at him.

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The club was a bit much at first, but Theo was there with him and that was all Seth cared about. But Theo kept pointing out different people in the club, asking, "What about her? What about him?" It was always someone good-looking, but Seth didn't really want to look away from Theo.

Seth wondered if he would get to see him dance, but he didn't actually want Theo dancing with someone else. As guys were giving Theo interested looks and smiles, it worried Seth that he might go off with one of them. But he couldn't spend all night acting like Theo was his territory and all trespassers would be shot on sight.

A gorgeous black girl gave Seth a quick smile, but she saved the brighter version of that smile for Theo. He caught it but then turned and gave a tall, muscular guy an appreciative once over. Maybe he was sending that girl a message that she was barking up the wrong tree. Or maybe the message was for Seth.

Theo kept pushing him to go after different people and Seth had to wonder what the heck he was up to. Was Theo trying to get rid of him so he could have his own fun?

With the noise of the club, he couldn't exactly ask Theo about it. Seth knew he couldn't do things with anyone else though. A lot of people played at sex, just did it for fun, and that might be fine for them, but Seth knew he couldn't go about it in that way. Theo was on his mind all the time, wanting him was eating him alive. This was not the kind of thing Seth could play with or it would kill him.

Theo didn't feel the same way. He wanted to let loose and maybe do something with one of these guys. Seth had no right to stop him, but he knew his face was still wearing the All Trespassers Will Be Shot sign every time any guy looked at Theo.

Turning his eyes away, Seth noticed that some people were going somewhere in the back. It was probably where people went to make out, but it had to be quieter there.

Grabbing Theo by the arm, Seth dragged him back there. Theo glared at him but didn't shake off his hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Seth saw couples pressed together in the shadows, but he ignored them.

His attention was on Theo as he demanded, "Why did we come here, Theo?" He knew he was picking a fight, but he couldn't leave it alone. There were just times when Theo made him feel like he had to prove he had a spine.

"To have fun if you can figure out how," Theo told him crossly.

"I'm thinking you just wanted to get me laid so I'd leave you alone," Seth said and hoped Theo would deny it.

"What? I don't need to get you all the way out here for that."

Seth tried again. "Maybe you wanted to bring me here to show me you have plenty of other options when it comes to guys."

"I need to show you that? You couldn't figure it out yourself?" Theo asked him raising his chin. "You sick of being wrong yet or you want to keep going?"

"You're the one who's wrong about me. I don't need to be with other guys or girls."

"I'm enough for you? Am I that special?" Theo's eyes challenged him, but Seth didn't say anything. He couldn't tell Theo that he was. "You don't even want to dance with any of them?"

"I can't really dance," Seth told him.

"So if I ask you to dance with me, you'd say no?" Theo asked.

That wasn't something Seth could refuse. "I would with you, but I'd end up embarrassing you."

"There are plenty of straight guys here, at least half of them don't know what they're doing on the dance floor," Theo told him.

"I'm not straight," Seth said a little too hotly, but Theo just raised an eyebrow.

"Come and prove it then, or do you have some reason you want us to stay right where we are?"

Seth did consider it, but he didn't want to be doing things with Theo with all these other people around. "I'll dance with you," Seth told him, and Theo took his hand to lead him back to the main part of the club.

Theo backed toward the dance floor pulling Seth along with him.

Mesmerized, Seth didn't take his eyes off him. Theo drew him close, not an inch between them. When Theo started moving, Seth moved with him. Seth tried to dance the best he could, so he let Theo's body guide his movements.

Here he was dancing, but he didn't feel self-conscious because all he saw was Theo dancing in front of him, against him.

Theo was incredible and Seth wasn't the only one who noticed. The DJ smiled and winked at Theo, and Seth pulled him in tighter though there was already no space between them.

"Not getting possessive, are you?" Theo asked right in his ear, but Seth didn't let go.

Theo was dancing with him and only for him. Other guys eyed him, but didn't approach.

They danced until they were exhausted and then headed back with Theo at the wheel. Now that he wasn't watching and feeling Theo dance, Seth had to consider how he behaved. He always wanted Theo to think he was better than he was. He sure failed at that tonight.

"I know I was acting like some territorial beast. I wasn't trying to keep you from having fun. Sorry."

"Is that what you were doing?" Theo said and gave him a teasing smile.

"I was trying not to, but I saw how other guys were looking at you. They wanted to dance with you and maybe get with you."

"And no one was looking at you, were they?" Theo asked.

Seth thought about it. "I think one guy did, but that must have been because I was dancing with you."

"Really? One guy?" Theo said like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"And the bartender smiled at me, but I think that was professional."

Theo sighed. "So how did you like dancing?"

Seth smiled big. "It was hot. I got hard."

"I know," Theo told him with a smirk.

"You were hard too," Seth accused him.

"You do that to me," Theo said and Seth looked down at his lap, embarrassed. "Now what do you want to do about it?"

Seth was halfway to asking Theo to just pull over somewhere, but then he remembered that they would have the house to themselves, if they ever got there. The drive seemed to take forever, and Seth was horny as hell.

Somehow he managed to keep his hands off Theo while he was driving, but as soon as he pulled up in front of the house, Seth was on him. His kiss was deep while he gathered handfuls of Theo's hair and

moaned into his mouth. Theo pushed his hand under the t-shirt he let Seth borrow and fondled his chest.

While Seth kissed him, his hands on Theo were greedy, tugging on his clothes like he wanted to get him naked right there in the truck. It didn't help that Theo was gliding his lips over his throat, running his hand over his chest, teasing his nipples with his fingertips.

Somehow Seth gathered his wits enough to gasp, "We should go inside." But he didn't stop groping Theo or kissing him everywhere he could.

Then Seth realized that he could get Theo naked once they went inside, and he let him go. The whole way to the front door and while Theo unlocked it, Seth had to fight to keep his hands to himself.

Inside, with the door shut and the light on, Seth watched Theo take off his jacket and throw it on a chair. Then Theo spun around and took Seth's breath away slamming him against the door.

His hand slid around to the back of Seth's neck and he kissed him hard. Theo rubbed him over his jeans and Seth felt his knees buckle. He braced himself against the door, but Theo's hand was gone.

"If you can't stay on your feet, we better move this to the bed," Theo told him.

"I can stay on my feet," Seth said, but Theo only chuckled. He was leading the way to the bedroom. Seth followed and grabbed his hand. Theo raised an eyebrow at him over his shoulder then squeezed his hand giving Seth a sweet feeling on top of how horny he was.

In the bedroom, he swung Theo around and laid him out on the bed. Taking his jacket off, Seth was on top of him, kissing his neck.

"I thought you liked light," Theo teased him.

"Right." Seth kissed his mouth real quick and told him, "Don't go anywhere." He then climbed off Theo and went to turn the lamp on. When Seth got back to him, Theo was sitting up, kicking his sneakers off. Seth toed off his own then leaned over Theo and pressed him back on the bed with a kiss.

They kissed and took each other's clothes off while Seth tried to touch Theo everywhere. He felt so good, Seth couldn't wait to go down on him, but Theo wouldn't let him.

He raised himself up so they were both kneeling on the bed, breathing hard and hanging onto each other. Their hard cocks were brushing and that was all Seth could think about.

"We have the house to ourselves, we should take advantage," Theo said. He was pressing his naked body against Seth's, making him lose his mind.

"What should we do?" Seth asked eager for doing anything with Theo.

"I want to fuck," Theo said in a low, husky voice, but his eyes

questioned Seth.

"Yes," Seth said before he even had time to think. His hands on Theo's lower back gripped him tighter then slid down over his ass.

"So have you been thinking about fucking me all this time?" Theo asked.

Seth couldn't deny it. "I had dreams, but I want it the other way around."

Theo was surprised. "You want me to fuck you?"

"You've done it before, haven't you?" Seth asked, but he wouldn't have been disappointed if Theo said no.

"I have," Theo said and Seth tried not to let him see how much he minded.

Jealous as hell, he challenged Theo, "Then you should know what you're doing. Show me." He placed his hands on Theo's waist but he couldn't keep them from moving, rubbing down his hips as he was grinding against him.

"You don't know what you're asking for," Theo said shaking his head. He might be saying that, but his chest was rising and falling with excitement, and when Seth pressed his lips to the side of his neck, he felt his pulse race.

Kissing his way over his jaw, he then put his mouth to Theo's ear and whispered, "You don't think I know what I want, but I do." It was true, but that didn't mean he wasn't scared, not of Theo fucking him. He was scared of wanting him too much, of losing his head over him.

"Are you trying to prove something?" Theo asked.

Pulling back just enough to be able to look into Theo's eyes, Seth tried to explain himself. "I might not be able to name or explain it, but it's like this. I look at you and I want to touch you. I touch you, I want to kiss you, I want to go down on my knees for you. And yeah, I want to fuck you, but I want you to fuck me first." When Theo didn't say anything, just stared back at him, Seth wondered if something else might be standing in the way. "Is there someone else you want to be doing this with?" Seth asked, his voice pained and hushed.

"You're going to need to let me go," Theo told him.

"What? No," Seth protested and only tightened his hold on him.

"I need to get condoms and lube unless you have them," Theo told him evenly.

"Ah, no," Seth said feeling embarrassed as he let him go.

But as Theo was gone, Seth felt tension ratcheting up, his head swimming, his nerves buzzing with need. When Theo got back, Seth tried not to be all over him, but he couldn't resist the crook of his neck or the smell of his skin.

Going to him, Seth buried his face against him, let his hair tickle him, then he kissed his mouth. He was dying to show Theo what he

felt, but he wanted to tell him too. Panting the words between kisses, he said, " I want to know what it's all about, I want... I want every part of you."

Wordlessly, Theo walked him back toward the bed then maneuvered him where he wanted him while letting Seth kiss him.

"I like kissing you too much," Seth said, knowing he was slowing him down.

"Or just enough," Theo told him with a grin.

Seth smiled up at him and watched him uncap the lube. Theo was watching him too, like he was waiting for Seth to change his mind.

That wasn't going to happen. Seth was ashamed at how little experience he had, but at the same time, he was glad he hadn't been with anyone else. It seemed right to feel everything with Theo for the first time.

Theo pushed one of his legs up and Seth hooked his arm under the knee. With a slick finger, Theo traced circles around his hole, teasing him then he pressed in. The feeling was strange then Theo's long finger was deep inside him and Seth shuddered then groaned as another finger went in.

"Does that feel OK?" Theo asked while stroking inside him.

"Feels good," Seth managed to say. It felt too good and he was ready to scream out to Theo to do anything he want to him.

His cock was getting so stiff now, all of him tight, all of him concentrated and pulsing around Theo's fingers. Theo pumped his fingers in and out despite the tightness of Seth's hole, then he asked, "You think you can take more?"

"Please," Seth breathed. He just meant to say a simple yes, not beg, but that's what came out.

One more finger made Seth let out one moan after another. The tight, aching feeling was so strong now. Seth knew he would come if Theo didn't stop it. But Seth couldn't speak only moan and rock his body into Theo's fingers.

Seth was close, and Theo wasn't stopping him only making sure his fingers were aimed just right. Then Theo bent down to take his cock in his mouth, and it was too much. The suction of Theo's mouth, his fingers thrusting in and out, he couldn't take it.

"I can't...I'm..." Seth couldn't get out the warning. He was coming. "Damn. Oh, damn," he groaned as he watched Theo swallow.

Seth dropped his head back and felt Theo's fingers leave him. Raising his red, sweaty face to Theo, Seth gasped, "Sorry. It took me over. I couldn't stop."

Theo licked his lips and grinned. "I'll make you come again, don't worry."

Seth was sure of it. He was still breathing hard, still turned on, still

pulsing from Theo's fingers inside him. A deep, burning ache was making him reach for Theo to pull him back.

"You want to keep going?" Theo asked.

"Damn right I do," Seth said, his voice rough. He was getting hard again and more sure than ever that everything Theo did to him could only be good and feel wonderful.

"All this cursing? You're such a bad boy now," Theo teased him.

He got out a condom and Seth knew he was supposed to use it, but he still asked, "Do you have to use that?"

Theo shut his eyes. "Seth," he said through gritted teeth then he slicked up his cock.

"I've never done anything with anyone," Seth told him.

"I always use one," Theo said, the condom still in his hand, his other hand pushing down on the back of Seth's thigh. "And you want me to make an exception for you, trust you?"

"I... No. I was just being selfish. Do it the right way," Seth told him.

"The right way?" Theo said and suddenly his naked cock was at Seth's hole. "Like this?"

Seth's whole body was trembling just at the contact. "Theo," he moaned and felt pressure, nothing like a finger, nothing like anything. It was intense, burning like a hot, steel rod was searing its way inside him. The pain was mingling with a needy ache and a deepening pleasure. Without even knowing it, Seth was moaning the whole time Theo was filling him up.

The long, steady thrust ended, and Theo was tight against him, all the way inside him. Seth couldn't breathe at the feeling of it.

Theo was inside of him, above him, his eyes burning, his body rocking, giving Seth a taste of the fucking he was going to get. The rocking turned into thrusting, slow and deep. Theo was pulling almost all the way out then driving his cock back into the center of him.

"You like it," Theo said. It wasn't a question. Seth was moaning under him so much, shivering, taking his cock like it was a gift.

On the next stroke, Theo pushed all the way then leaned down and kissed him. Seth slid trembling hands down Theo's back and over his ass. He thrust his tongue inside Theo's mouth and felt him start to pump again.

Theo fucked him while they kissed, Seth's cock rubbing against him. Then Theo rose again, gripped Seth by the backs of his knees and was back to doing him deep and slow. It wasn't like before. Seth was closer now, the need to come growing desperate, even more than before when Theo was fingering him and he couldn't contain himself.

Theo's pumping was getting hard, but suddenly he stopped and pulled out. "Turn over," he ordered and Seth obeyed, anything for Theo to let him have it again.

As soon as Seth was on all fours, Theo was in again. Pounding him harder, he was holding onto Seth's hips. The feeling building inside him wouldn't let him hold still. Seth started to rock back, fuck himself on Theo's cock.

He kept to Theo's pace so they slammed together. Theo went faster and harder, and Seth matched him, helped the man fuck him.

Seth's cock was bouncing until Theo wrapped his hand around it, giving him something to thrust into. His cock in Theo's hot grip made him crazy, bucking wildly.

Pleasure was surging hot and powerful from deep inside him until it overtook him and almost knocked him down. He felt Theo's hands grip him harder, marking him. There was no stopping, until Seth was grunting and coming. Then Theo was coming too, calling his name in a strained growl. Theo was unloading inside him and Seth felt like his whole body would shake apart as he screamed, "Yes. Fuck, yes."

Dazed, Seth collapsed and Theo cleaned him up. He stroked Seth's back as he did it like he didn't want to break the connection between them.

"I didn't know it could feel like this. I didn't think anything in the world could feel this good. I didn't want it to ever end," Seth mumbled while reaching for Theo.

But Theo had gone to turn the lamp off and then all they had was moonlight coming in through the window.

"I guess it was good for you," Theo said, his voice husky close by his ear. He was lying down next to him, and Seth hoped he wasn't going anywhere.

"Everything is good with you," Seth said half asleep, happy to feel Theo beside him.

"You'll be sore tomorrow. You might even regret it," Theo said, but that was impossible.

"Not one little bit," Seth said, turned over and pulled him into his arms.

As Theo came to rest against his chest, Seth was afraid to breathe. But then he felt Theo breathing against him – both his chest rising and falling and the heat of his breath on his skin, so Seth started breathing too, timing it to Theo's. He wondered if he could get his heart to beat the same too.

"I'm never going to be able to let you go now," Seth thought as he drifted off, but he wasn't sure if the words made it out.

Chapter 25

It was another very early morning that had Theo climbing out of Seth's bed and sneaking back into the bedroom he shared with Ace. Sometimes Ace would wake up and ask him where he was.

"I was hanging out with Seth," Theo told him. It was close enough to the truth, and Ace had only one follow up question.

"Did you play video games without me?"

So far, Theo hadn't talked to Ace about him and Seth. He didn't know exactly what was going on between them, but he did know it was good. That's why he tried not to question it too much.

That morning after breakfast as Ace was running around the woods with the cat, he had yelled about how many flowers Butter found. Theo was pretty sure cats weren't interested in flowers, but now that he was standing outside he could see for himself all the new green shoots and colorful buds coming out on the shrubs and trees.

It made him smile. Until now he never thought he would like living in a house that seemed to be in the middle of the woods. After all coming here was a desperation move. But seeing the forest around them come alive was really nice, and he was looking forward to looking out there at lots of green.

Theo had cleaned up their picnic table for lunch. They were expecting a bunch of kids to show up for a "forest adventure", and Ace was now in the kitchen with Seth helping him put together some sandwiches and making sure he didn't put too much salad in them.

Theo was expecting the kids to be dropped off any minute, but the car he saw pulling up in front wasn't one he ever wanted to see again. As the car door opened, Theo kept staring like he could will her away, but there she was, Aunt Cindy. At least she was alone. For now anyway.

Watching her approach, Theo was reminded of how much he hated that she looked like their mother. But the closer she got, the less she looked like Mom. She might have Mom's blond, wavy hair and slight frame, but Aunt Cindy didn't have Mom's expressive eyes full of kindness. Seeing her up close, Theo only saw the woman who failed them and hurt Ace.

"Why are you here?" Theo said to her, but she didn't answer as she looked over his shoulder at the house. Was she looking for Ace?

"That's a nice little house. You gonna invite me inside?" she asked

with an insincere smile.

"No."

"We need to have a little talk, Theo," she said wiping the fake smile off her face.

"We have nothing to talk about," Theo told her.

She opened her mouth to disagree, but just then Rico drove up. Aunt Cindy gave Theo one of her thin smiles and she went off to her car. As Theo watched her drive away, Rico let Sammy and Gloria out of the car. After greeting them, Theo pointed them toward the door to the kitchen where they would find Butter and Ace.

"That's not a happy look you're wearing," Rico said as he came over.

"Just an unwelcome visitor," Theo said then he pointed at what Rico had in his hand. "Is that a swing?"

"Mitch made it. Just pick a sturdy branch and tie it off then watch the kids fight over who gets to swing on it," Rico said as he handed it to him.

"Oh, OK. Thanks."

He went off and Rob and Julian were next to arrive with Danny and Lenny. "We'll keep a close eye on Danny," Theo assured them and he wasn't planning to let Ace out of his sight either.

Danny and Lenny went to join the other kids, and Julian told him, "Thanks. It's nice of you to host the kids."

"We're planning to take full advantage," Rob said and he grinned at Julian.

"I'm not confirming or denying anything," his fiancé said.

"Have fun," Theo told them then he went to show Seth the swing they needed to install.

They were picking out a tree for it with the help of the kids when Wyatt got there, but didn't get out of the car, only the kids did.

"I'm going to pick up Sam." Wyatt waved to Theo and Seth then he called out to the boys, "OK, you guys try not to get eaten by bears."

"Bears!" Ry yelled like he was ready to challenge them to a fight.

Theo wanted to tell Wyatt about his aunt but he was gone too fast, eager to get together with his husband.

As the kids kept them busy, Theo tried not to let Ace see how rattled he was. Of course Seth noticed, but Theo couldn't talk to him about it just then. "I'll tell you what's going on later," Theo told him. For now he just wanted all the kids to have fun.

They had hours of fun with Theo and Seth keeping them safe. It was exhausting, but the unwelcome visitor was never far from Theo's mind. He watched Ace, so happy and carefree, but he wouldn't be if he knew their aunt was there.

Later on, it was Sam who picked up the boys and Theo knew he had to talk to him. "I need to tell you something and Wyatt should know this too. My aunt is in town and she can't have anything to do with Ace. If she approaches him or tries to take him anywhere, please call me."

"We would never let Ace go off with anyone unless you told us it was OK," Sam assured him.

"Thank you."

"Let us know if you need anything," Sam said and he touched his arm briefly.

"You've already done a lot for me and Ace."

When Rico and Mitch came by to pick up Sammy, Rico looked all around then he nudged his husband. "This place would be perfect." He then explained himself to Theo. "My grandma likes to throw an egg hunt for her Easter party in her nice garden, but it would be more of a serious hunt out here."

Rob was still there, and he disagreed. "It isn't supposed to be a 'serious hunt'. It's supposed to be easy."

"Then how are the kids supposed to hone their hunting instincts?" Rico asked.

"You planning to hand out bows and arrows?" Rob asked.

Theo cut off their arguing with a question, "Does your grandmother hide real or chocolate eggs?"

"Real ones. You thinking of doing chocolate? Grandma throws her Easter bash in the evening. I was thinking we could throw a hunt out here earlier. Lunchtime? What do you say?" Rico said.

Theo agreed. "Sounds great. OK. It's on." He wanted to give Ace something good, an antidote to their aunt being there and whatever she was up to.

Seth had the dinner shift at the tearoom so they didn't get to talk until he came back that night. Ace was already in bed, but Theo wanted to make sure they weren't overheard so they stayed in the kitchen. Theo leaned against the counter tiredly, and Seth leaned next to him and took his hand to encourage him to talk.

"I told you about our aunt. Well, she's here," Theo said.

"Why? What does she want?" Seth asked, frowning.

"Ace. I wasn't supposed to take him away, but I had to get him away from her and her boyfriend. He was violent and our aunt..." Theo took

a breath. "I still don't understand how she could be our mom's sister. She's nothing like her. Where mom had the biggest heart, Aunt Cindy has an empty hole. It's even more confusing for Ace."

"You can't let her take him," Seth said.

"No. Ace wouldn't be safe with her. After Aunt Cindy kicked me out, she started seeing this white supremacist. I didn't know it at the time, but it turned out he was beating on her. At one point he did it while Ace was there to witness it. Ace tried to get between them, but our aunt started hitting Ace, telling him to keep his mouth shut. I only found out about that later. The next time it happened, Ace couldn't keep quiet. Jerry hurt our aunt pretty bad and Ace called 911. She ended up in the hospital, and Ace stayed with me. When we went to see our aunt in the hospital, she said it was our fault her boyfriend got arrested. I got audio on my phone of her telling us to go live on the street because that's where we belonged, but I don't know if it will stand up in court."

"I can't believe you thought to record her," Seth said.

"She had claimed that Ace lied. She was denying that her boyfriend was the one who hurt her. I thought she might admit to something when it was just us."

"Is her boyfriend still in jail? She didn't bring him, did she?" Seth asked, his expression dark.

"I hope not. I was thinking that she might have gotten smart and dumped him. That could be why she's here. Her boyfriend never wanted Ace around. With him gone..."

Seth could guess what he was afraid of. "No. No."

"I can't imagine why else she would be here. I'll have to start work on getting custody, but I didn't make myself look good by taking Ace away without going to court first. I could be charged with kidnapping."

"Your aunt threw you out. But why didn't you go to court then? If she hit Ace..."

"They might have taken Ace away from her, but they wouldn't have placed him with me. I didn't have a permanent place to live. I was just staying with different friends, and I only had a part time job. I didn't know where Ace might have ended up. That's why we came here."

"You have a job and a proper place to live now. They'll let you keep Ace," Seth said, but Theo could tell he had doubts. Instead of words, Seth offered him a different kind of comfort. He opened his arms and let Theo step into them.

Theo sagged against him, but the need for comfort became so strong, making him cling to Seth.

Theo spent a sleepless night and kept Seth awake too as he held him and refused to let him leave his bed. "If I go, you can get some sleep," Theo told him.

"I'm keeping you company," Seth said and only held him tighter.

In the morning, Theo had to tell Ace about Aunt Cindy. He put it off because he didn't want to ruin the fun day Ace had with the other kids, but now it had to be done.

Theo still waited until after breakfast to give him the bad news. Then he watched Ace's face crumple.

"How did she find us?" Ace asked.

"This place isn't a secret," Theo told him and rubbed his back.

"I don't want to go home with her," Ace said and leaned on Theo.

"I don't want you to either," Theo told him, afraid to promise anything. He put his arms around Ace.

Theo hated to see how his expression changed, like time had turned back. Ace was scared again, and Theo was too. He had to find out what Aunt Cindy wanted.

He didn't want to see her but it was better to get it over with and not risk her showing up at the house when Ace was there. Theo had Seth take Ace and Butter to visit Sammy's cats. Theo hoped that would be enough to distract him.

When he called his aunt, Theo wasn't sure where she would want to meet up, but she immediately said she was coming over to the house. He waited for her in front and tried to suppress any sign of fear.

"Why did you come here?" Theo asked her as soon as she got out of the car.

"You're not gonna ask me to come inside?" she said.

"I know you're not here for a visit," Theo told her and didn't invite her in.

"I'd like to see where you're living," she said and walked past him.

"Are you still seeing Jerry?" Theo asked and stepped in front of her.

"We don't need to talk about him. Is there some reason you don't want me to see where you have Ace living?"

"You hit Ace, threatened him and called him a liar so you could protect your abusive boyfriend," Theo told her.

"I never did any such thing," she lied. "Now I want to see this house of yours right now."

Theo narrowed his eyes at her. "Why are you so determined to see the house?"

She huffed then looked from the house to him then after a long

pause she came out with it. "I want to see if it's in good enough shape to sell," she said.

"What? No one is selling that house," Theo told her sharply.

"You kidnapped Ace. You should be in jail, but I'm willing to look past it. This house will be sold so you can pay me back for all the trouble you caused me."

So that's what she was up to.

"The house isn't for sale," Theo informed her.

"You owe me! Do you want to go to jail?" she threatened then took a breath. "I don't want to have to take Ace away from you, just do like I say and sell this place."

"You threw us out," Theo reminded her.

"Smarten up, Theo. If you love your brother, if you want to keep Ace, you'll sell the house." With that she left, and Theo covered his eyes with both hands.

She was after money, not Ace. That was almost good news. But losing the house... And what made her think the house was worth anything? It would take forever to sell a property in the middle of nowhere. Not that he wanted to do it.

As soon as Theo texted Seth that his aunt was gone, he wanted to come back without Ace so they could talk. But once he got there, Theo didn't let him get out of the truck.

"I'm too tense to stay put," he told Seth. "And too pissed off."

"We'll go for a drive," Seth said and got them on the road.

"I found out why my aunt is here. She wants money. She wants me to sell the house and give her the money. She said I owe her, but she's really blackmailing me. I either give her the money or go to jail and lose Ace. I guess I should be grateful she didn't already have me arrested."

"What are you going to do?"

"The house was built by our great-grandparents. I don't want to give it up, but it's better to lose the house than Ace. It makes me sick that she's using Ace as a bargaining chip, but that means she is willing to give up on him."

"So you'll sell?"

"I might have to, but I own it jointly with Ace. My aunt is not in charge of Ace's stake in the house. One of Mom and Dad's friends is. He would have to give permission for the sale to happen." Theo still doubted he could find a buyer, but there was another obstacle. "If I give my aunt the money, I would only have her word that she would give up on Ace. That means I can't give her anything before I have custody of Ace, but I don't know if she'll agree to that."

They drove for a while, following the river, and seeing all the signs of spring. The riverbanks were turning green, and in some places, colorful with flowers.

"How did Ace seem?" Theo asked.

"Poor guy was sad, but then there were cats to wrangle, and Mitch and Rico are building a playhouse for Sammy. It was supposed to be just a dollhouse but it kept getting bigger. Ace and Sammy are helping. I wanted to lend a hand, but they didn't need all that many extra hands."

"I'm glad things are busy over there. That will help keep Ace's mind off our aunt being here," Theo said. "We can get some lunch and take it over to them. Maybe from that barbeque place."

They drove a little longer then circled back to L&L barbeque. The small building with its big roof and all the open air cooking on the side got Seth's approval.

"That's what a barbeque place should look like," he said.

Getting closer, Theo saw that they would have to park on the rise then walk the rest of the way toward the riverbank. Just as Theo, got out of the truck, he got a call from Mrs. Del Rio. "My real estate gal just let me know that a woman who said she was your aunt has been inquiring about the sale of your house and land."

Hearing that, Theo let Seth take care of the food while he stayed by the truck and talked to her.

"That was my aunt, but the house isn't hers to sell," Theo told Mrs. Del Rio.

"That was my thinking. Your aunt spoke like she was sure the property would be on the market soon, but I knew that couldn't be right. That's why I wanted to speak to you."

Theo decided to just come out and tell her the truth. "My aunt thinks she can blackmail me into agreeing to sell the house and give her the money." Theo grit his teeth then he continued. "You see I don't have custody of Ace yet. She does. But I couldn't leave Ace with her." Theo told her about his aunt's boyfriend and hoped she would understand the situation he was in.

After he was done, Mrs. Del Rio's voice was shaking as she told him, "Well, that aunt of yours, she is... I'll be ladylike and say no more. But I do have to tell you, honey, it's my fault your aunt thinks the house is worth blackmailing you for. I had my real estate gal look into buying it a while back. I asked her to find the owner and make an offer. I guess your aunt got wind of it. I didn't offer all that much really. I'm sorry, honey."

"Our aunt is just greedy. It's not your fault."

"This boyfriend isn't around here, is he?" Mrs. Del Rio wanted to know.

"I don't know."

"You need to let Sheriff Jackson know about him, just in case."

"And tell her I took Ace away without getting custody of him first?" Theo said.

"Ah. Well, that's what lawyers are for." Theo was about to say he couldn't afford one and was still looking at Legal Aid, but she guessed the truth. "You don't have one? Let me talk to mine. See how you can get on the right side of this."

Theo thanked her, and leaned against the truck door. That explained why his aunt was doing this, but he still didn't have a solution.

While he waited, Theo could see Seth waiting in line for the food. He went down to join him, but then he had to step away to take another unexpected call.

On the way back to the truck with the food which smelled amazing, Theo told Seth what he found out. "Mrs. Del Rio wanted to buy the house and the land at one time. Now she feels bad that her offer made Aunt Cindy see dollar signs, so she offered to get her lawyer involved. Then Julian called to tell me Mrs. Del Rio asked him to help us out too, and a custody lawyer would be in touch with me. She called it an 'all hands on deck situation'."

"That's good. You'll take their help, right?" Seth asked and gave him a sideways look.

"I haven't let my pride get in my way so far," Theo said. "This is too important. I'll take whatever help I can get, but that doesn't change the fact that I basically kidnapped my little brother."

"No one in their right mind would call it that," Seth said. "You're a good big brother."

"Maybe you can be a character witness for me," Theo said as they climbed into the truck, but then he noticed that Seth stopped and frowned.

"What is it?" Theo asked him.

Seth stopped frowning but he could only manage a sad smile. "I would do anything to help you and Ace stay together," he said, but for some reason, his words gave Theo an uneasy feeling.

Chapter 26

Seth knew that tonight Theo wouldn't be sharing his bed. Ace needed him, so he was sure to spend the night in their room, though Seth doubted he would sleep much.

That meant Seth would need to talk to him before he went off to bed. He was dreading what he had to do and telling Theo about it, but it had to be done.

Theo was smart, prepared, always thinking and planning. In so many ways, Theo was ahead of the game, but that might not be enough to keep him and Ace safe if the law got involved.

That's why Seth had done his own thinking. He stopped Theo in the kitchen and told him, "I'll need to move out again, so I won't cause trouble for you and Ace."

"What?" Theo said a little too loudly. Then he lowered his voice. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ace belongs with you, and I can't get in the way of that." Seth had decided. He knew that's how it had to be, but he wanted to be touching Theo and kissing him, not telling him he had to leave. "I told you about my troubles back in Waterfield. The sheriff could never bring charges against me, but he took me in a bunch of times. Having someone like me living with you is gonna make you look bad. You know I'm right."

"No, I don't. I can't believe you're saying this."

Seth was surprised to hear him deny it, but that didn't mean he was wrong. "Theo, I'm bad news."

"Don't say that, damn it," Theo said under his breath.

"I am if you go to court. I only want to help you and protect you. I know what it's like to lose family." Seth then had to ask something. "Do you think Ace will understand?"

"No," Theo told him bluntly. Then he softened his voice. "I'll try my best to make him understand."

In the morning, Seth waited out on the porch while Theo sat down with Ace to tell him he was moving out again. Seth already had his bag with all his stuff in the truck. Seeing that old, taped up bag reminded him of what his life used to be, when all he knew was how to limp away like a kicked dog.

It hurt to leave, and it hurt to have Theo mad at him. But Ace being taken away from Theo would be much worse.

And it happened right when things were going so good, with Theo in his bed most nights even if he did leave at the crack of dawn. It had still been sweet to sleep next to him and hold him and everything else they did.

When Theo and Ace came out, Seth felt his chest get tight. Ace had his book bag on and his head down, but then he ran over to Seth and hugged him hard. Without letting go, he frowned up at Seth, "You're always leaving us."

"No. It's just for a little while," Seth told him.

"Did Aunt Cindy make you leave?" Ace asked, but it looked to Seth like he had already made up his mind. Seth still looked over at Theo.

"Once she's gone, things will get back to normal," Theo said. "Now let's go before we're late for work and for school."

Alone in the truck with Theo after they dropped off Ace, Seth wanted to say something. He almost said that it would all turn out all right. But who would he be reassuring, Theo or himself?

There were other things he wanted to say but didn't dare, not when Theo looked so grim.

He was still mad about Seth leaving. Seth took it as a sign that Theo wanted him around, but he wasn't any good to him and Ace right now.

They parked on the far side of the inn parking lot, but before going inside, Seth got out the house key on that Peach Tree keychain that Theo had given him. "You should have this." As he offered Theo the key back he paused closing his fist around it. "I... Can I keep the keychain?"

"You can keep them both," Theo told him and pushed his hand away then looked down. "I'm pissed at you. Don't think I'm not, but you still live with us as far as I'm concerned."

Seth only stared at him. A catch in his throat wouldn't let him speak so he just nodded.

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With Dustin looking over his shoulder, Theo was doing some checking after a customer had trouble making a reservation online. He wanted to make sure there wasn't a problem with the inn website. From what he could tell, the issue was on the other end.

"I'm writing up a report on that. I think the feedback could be clearer when a reservation doesn't go through," Theo told him since technically Dustin was supposed to be supervising him.

"A report for a little glitch like that? Going after some extra credit. Have at it. Better you than me," Dustin said.

Maybe he had a point about that. Theo was probably trying too hard to prove himself to Andy and Leo. He was also making more work for himself when he had so many things on his mind. The lawyer Julian hired for him was already working on trying to keep Theo out of jail and get him custody of Ace. She had advised Theo not to sell the house, but Theo didn't see how else he would keep Aunt Cindy from ruining everything.

He was also worried about how Ace was handling things. He was anxious again and had trouble sleeping. It helped that Theo was sharing the room with him, and having Butter to keep him company was good for him too, but he missed Seth.

Seth moving out was another thing Theo couldn't stop thinking about. Going home without him these past few days was miserable.

No matter how many times he told himself it made sense for Seth to move out, he couldn't make peace with it. He wanted Seth with them. He wanted to be able to talk to him late at night or climb into bed with him.

Telling himself to focus on work, he was still so angry, not at Seth really. This was his aunt's fault. But seeing Seth just brought the anger back. Behind the French windows of the tearoom, Seth was taking an order and practicing that pleasant, professional smile that Theo helped him perfect.

Theo dragged his eyes away and stared at the computer screen without seeing what was actually on it. Seth leaving might be the right thing, but it was so wrong too. Theo wanted him to stay, needed him to.

When it was time for school to let out, Theo was ready to text Wyatt to see if everything was OK, but he got a call from him first. He wanted to bring Ace over to the inn. "I think he needs a little brotherly visit. Your aunt approached him at recess. Noreen chased her off, but he's upset."

Wyatt and the boys arrived a little later just as Leo brought the baby from Andy's office. Theo didn't even get to talk to Ace because the boys went straight for Leo and the baby.

Dustin was in awe of the kids as they showed no fear of Leo. "Look at that little blond one. He'll fight anyone."

He meant Ry, who was trying to convince Leo that they should be

best friends. "Then I'll have a bigger best friend than DJ," Ry said and he pouted at his brother and Ace.

"Oh, man, you don't need to worry about me being friends with DJ," Ace told him. "You two are brothers. Don't you know brothers are forever?"

Coming over to lean on the front desk, Wyatt had on a sad smile. "Where was this kid when me and my brother needed someone to set us straight? Did you teach him that?" he asked Theo.

"When my aunt kicked me out of the house, Ace was worried that he wouldn't get to see me, so I told him that brothers are forever," Theo said.

"Sorry you guys had to go through that. Noreen said she would keep a close eye on Ace," Wyatt told him.

"Thank you for bringing Ace here," Theo said.

"No problem. I got busy and skipped breakfast and lunch, so I'm going to take the boys to eat in the inn restaurant and get takeout for Sam. I hope Ace can come with us."

"If you let me pick up the tab," Theo said.

Wyatt looked like he wanted to argue, but then he just sighed. "OK, but I'm treating them to dessert in the tearoom."

"That way Ace can visit with Seth. All right. It's a deal."

Ace stopped by the front desk, and Theo told him, "I know Aunt Cindy was at the school. How are you doing?"

"Ms Kurtz made her go away. Theo, it's good to have a scary teacher," Ace said and Theo couldn't help but laugh.

"So you here to visit me or the baby?" Theo teased him.

"You and Seth too."

Theo told him the plan, but Ace poked his head into the tearoom to say hi to Seth before he went off with Wyatt and the boys to eat. Theo wished he could go talk to Seth. Or maybe he just wanted to throw his arms around him and let Seth hold him.

After their lunch, Wyatt went to sit with Andy in the lounge area. The boys went to the tearoom where Seth served them dessert. Theo kept glancing that way to check on them, and it looked like the boys were behaving themselves. He also got to watch Seth and see his real smile.

When the boys were done, Wyatt took them to explore the inn's extensive grounds. They ended up staying until it was time for Theo to go home. Seth wasn't done with his shift, so Theo left him the truck and got a ride from Wyatt.

When he and Ace got home, Theo finally found out more about what happened at school, but didn't get to talk to Seth about it until he

called late that night.

"Aunt Cindy stopped by Ace's school at recess. That's why Wyatt brought him by the inn," Theo told him.

"What did she want?"

"She was telling Ace how he'll have to go and live with her if I don't wise up, and that things would get bad for me. She wanted to send a message through Ace."

"She must have scared him bad. Damn her," Seth said, and Theo could hear him gritting his teeth.

"She did. I'm just glad Wyatt and the boys were so good at taking his mind off it until I finished work."

"True. Ace didn't seem too bad off considering. It helped that he got to see you," Seth said.

"And you too. Don't be a stranger. Come over tomorrow after work," Theo told him.

"I can cook something," Seth volunteered.

They talked some more about the legal stuff the lawyer had gone over with Theo. But Theo really wanted to listen to Seth's voice for a while.

"I need a break from my own issues. Tell me about your day," he told Seth.

"Well, these three kids came in to have some cake in the tearoom and they pretty much made my day," Seth said and Theo could hear the smile in his voice. "And there's this real good-looking guy at the reception desk. I can't keep my eyes off him."

"Oh. I didn't know you had a thing for Dustin."

That got a laugh out of Seth. "No, it's this other guy. The serious one with pretty eyes."

Theo couldn't believe the things Seth was saying. "So this is what you're like late night on the phone."

"I guess it's kind of freeing, but it's not as good as being there," Seth said and his voice was full of feeling.

Theo had to shut his eyes, but that only made him picture Seth next to him. With Seth's voice in his ear, it was too easy to imagine his touch, his scent, his mouth on every inch of him.

Chapter 27

The next day when Seth arrived at the house after work, Ace showed him what Sam sent over. "We helped Sam in the garden, and I got this." It was a jar of homemade tomato sauce made from their own tomatoes.

"You must have done a good job," Seth said. "And I know what I'm going to be making with this. I'll use the sauce and the recipe Sam gave me to make a pizza. And we can follow that up with the skillet cookie."

"This is like Ace's dream dinner," Theo told him, while Ace jumped with excitement.

Ace got to help with kneading the dough, and Theo made sure to keep Butter and her hair away from the action. While the pizza dough was rising, they went out so Butter could climb some trees.

"We should have a garden too," Ace said to Theo and Seth.

Theo knew what he had in mind, but he still asked him, "You want to grow flowers?"

"No. Tomatoes. DJ and Ry and their dads have a garden with tomatoes and herbs and green beans, but we don't need the green beans. No green beans." Ace wanted to make that very clear. "We just need tomatoes so we can make pizza sauce, and then we can make pizzas all the time."

"Listen to this little farmer," Theo said. "You going to take care of this pizza sauce garden?"

"Yes. Me and Seth," Ace said.

"Don't volunteer Seth," Theo told him, but Seth didn't mind.

"I'd love to help. I helped our neighbor back home with her garden. I don't claim that I'm knowledgeable though. I was just an extra pair of hands. Her back wasn't so good any more so she couldn't bend down like she used to."

While Seth and Ace made gardening plans, Theo tried not to think about how they would probably have to sell the house. He didn't want to bring Ace down, so he didn't mention anything about that.

"I want to make some salad. You guys hang out," Theo told them.

"Not salad," he heard Ace complain as he went in.

Theo had been watchful ever since their aunt showed up, but from the kitchen, he didn't have a good view of the front of the house. The first sign that something was wrong was Seth calling his name. As he

ran out the door, Theo only caught a glimpse of his aunt's car out the window.

He expected to see her out there, but it was much worse than that. Jerry was getting out of her car and grabbing Ace by the arm.

Theo rushed at him, but Seth was closer. He grabbed Jerry's right shoulder, digging his fingers in until he released Ace. Seth didn't let him go. He had grabbed a few fingers of Jerry's other hand, twisting them the wrong way. Jerry let out a sound of pain.

As Ace ran to him, Theo said, "Seth!"

Seth let go, shoving Jerry away from him. Aunt Cindy tried to check if her boyfriend was hurt. Jerry's shoulder was hunched and he cradled his hand against his middle, but he pushed her away. He was cursing until Seth took a step toward him and bellowed at him, "Watch your mouth!"

Aunt Cindy pulled on Jerry's arm and pleaded with him, "Don't, Jerry. That's not why we're here. Come on." But he told her to shut her mouth. "This isn't the way," she said anyway, and he looked ready to slug her.

If he tried it, Theo was prepared to launch himself at him. Even if he hated his aunt, he wasn't going to let that piece of garbage hurt her in front of him and Ace. Jerry didn't do it though.

"You two need to leave, and if you try something like this again, you'll get nothing," Theo warned them.

"You know what you need to do, Theo," she said, making it clear that this whole visit was a threat to take Ace from him by force.

Scared, Ace had his arms wrapped around Theo, and he could feel his little brother shaking. Aunt Cindy was tugging Jerry back toward the car. The whole way he snarled at Seth.

"You better not come back," Seth said in a voice so harsh and deep, that it made Ace jump.

Once they were gone, Seth turned to Theo and Ace. All the threat and fury leaving his face, he asked, "Ace, you OK?"

"I didn't know you could be scary, Seth," Ace said to him.

"They deserved it," Theo told him and Ace nodded.

"It's OK," Seth said and got down to hug him.

Ace rested his head on Seth's shoulder. Then he looked at him and told him, "Seth, you're muscly."

"Uh, alright," Seth said, kind of confused.

"Let's see what that pizza dough is doing," Theo told Ace.

As Ace went to get Butter to climb down from a tree, Seth turned to Theo. "I'll be staying here tonight and from now on. I might be bad news for you in court, but..."

Theo stopped him. "I want you to stay."

"You gonna call the sheriff?" Seth asked.

"I can't. My aunt has the right to take Ace. I'm the one who's in the wrong legally. But I'm going to call the lawyer and see what she says."

Going inside, Seth made sure to keep Ace busy helping him make the pizza. While the pizza was baking, they made the skillet cookie together and set the table.

"That's a good-looking pizza," Seth said when he set it in the middle of the table.

It wasn't exactly round, but it did taste good.

"You guys did a good job with this pizza," Theo told them as they were finishing it off.

"It didn't have any salad. That's why it was good," Ace said, and Theo remembered that he meant to make some.

They were all reminded of why it didn't get done, and Ace turned gloomy.

"Don't forget Seth made you that skillet cookie," Theo said to try to cheer him up.

"It's about time I serve that up." Seth got the cookies then he asked Ace, "When are we shopping for those chocolate eggs for the egg hunt? That's this Sunday, you know."

Ace perked up right away. "We have to hurry."

"What we have to do is keep track of all the eggs we hide very carefully and make sure they all get found. I'll have to make a map," Theo said and saw Seth smile at him then nudge Ace.

"You think he's gonna do research too?" Seth asked Ace.

"Are you, Theo?" Ace wanted to know.

"I might. Like what's the biggest chocolate Easter egg ever made?" Theo got out his phone and then showed Ace what he found while he stuffed his face with the skillet cookie.

Later on, when Theo got started on making a map of the area around the house, he got Ace involved. Theo also let him stay up a little later then made sure he was fast asleep before leaving him and going to Seth in the living room.

Right away Seth got up and came to him. "How you doin'?"

All evening, Theo had been acting like everything was OK, but of course Seth knew it was all a front. Now that Theo was alone with him, his facade was breaking apart. "I... I couldn't... I had to..." The words wouldn't come, so Seth just grabbed him and hugged him tight.

"You were doing good, holding it together for Ace," Seth praised him.

"That's because you were out in front to deal with Jerry," Theo told him, feeling so grateful.

"Seeing him lay his hands on Ace, I wanted to put him in the ground." Theo could hear the rage in his voice and feel his whole body tense.

"You didn't and that's good."

"I knew it wouldn't help you."

Theo cupped his face and kissed him softly, grateful for his strength, for him just being there.

They climbed into bed together though Theo didn't plan to sleep there. But he couldn't leave. He needed some warmth and affection desperately. He needed Seth, no one but him.

Chapter 28

By Sunday everything was ready for the egg hunt. The one at Theo's included lunch, but Theo and Ace were also going to Mrs. Del Rio's for her Easter party with the real colored eggs for the kids to find. Seth had to work the dinner shift, but he was happy to be with Theo and Ace for the chocolate egg hunt.

Seth got to cook a whole bunch, but it was all about those chocolate eggs. Like Theo insisted, every hidden egg was marked on his map. Theo and Seth hid them without Ace that way he could search for them just like the other kids. They also had a piñata egg and hung some eggs from tree branches around it.

Ace was as excited as a kid could be and Seth and Theo both gave him plenty to do so he'd stay busy. It was just what Ace needed to keep him from thinking about his no good aunt and her boyfriend.

Once all the kids arrived, they were running wild through the trees, screaming every time they found an egg. Whoever found the most eggs would get to have the first whack at the piñata.

Watching the kids, Seth was really thinking about how he got to kiss Theo among the trees when they were hiding those eggs. It was sweet, and Theo felt so right in his arms.

"You know they might find some real eggs out there," Theo said from right next to him and startled him.

"I guess some birds might have started laying them," Seth said.

"You were out of it just now. What's up?"

"I was just thinking about what we got up to out there, and what we didn't," Seth said and shot him a quick grin.

"It's not the time to remind me of that when we have all these kids running around," Theo told him sounding cross, but Seth just kept smiling at him.

Their bosses were there with Lucy, and Leo was taking pictures of the baby's first egg hunt. Theo and Seth went inside with Andy to show him around and Rico tagged along. Ace got the idea to take pictures too, so he came in to get an old phone. He heard Theo saying to Andy, "The house is small but..."

That's when Ace jumped in to defend their home. "It's not small. It has everything a house is supposed to have." He opened the bathroom door. "This is our bathroom, and it's clean."

"He's my kind of tour guide," Rico said.

Seth was thinking how he didn't want to see Theo and Ace lose their home. It wasn't right.

Going outside, Seth took some pictures of Ace before he ran off to hunt for eggs and take pictures of his own. He was so happy, but Seth couldn't shake what almost happened, how that man grabbed Ace and scared him.

Since that time of the breakin at his grandfather's, Seth hadn't let himself fight anyone. But when that Jerry grabbed Ace, Seth was ready to break every bone in his body.

Now all he wanted to do was to stand guard over Theo and Ace, not let them leave his sight. But just being there wasn't enough. He had to do more.

"You have that look again."

Seth jumped at the words. It was Leo. He didn't have the baby with him. It looked like Mitch had taken over holding her as he and some of the other adults went to see what the kids were up to.

"I noticed you looking the same way these last few days when you've been preoccupied at work," Leo said.

"I'm real sorry, I..."

At his apology, Leo raised his hand to stop him. "Your work hasn't suffered, but something is weighing on you. Something serious judging by that grim expression you had on."

Leo seemed like a guy who knew how to deal with trouble. Bet he would know what to do about that Jerry, but could Seth talk to him?

"Do you want to tell me what's on your mind?" Leo asked.

So far Seth couldn't figure it out on his own, and he couldn't ask Theo. He decided to go for it. "Someone is causing trouble for Theo and his little brother. Me and this guy nearly came to blows. I held my hand, but I wonder if it might not have been better to let him pummel me, not fight back. Then he might land in jail and..."

"Let me stop you right there," Leo said. "You want to get yourself beat up to help Theo and Ace?"

"It's the only thing I can think of. I'd much rather beat on him, but that wouldn't do Theo and Ace one bit of good."

"Do you think Theo would want you to get beat up to help him?" Leo asked.

Seth didn't need to think about it. "I know he wouldn't."

"And how would Ace feel?" Leo asked.

"Maybe we can keep it from him," Seth told him, feeling dumb for even saying it.

"I doubt it," Leo said. "And for how long do you think this guy would land in jail after beating on you? You look more than capable of defending yourself."

Seth saw his point. "I'd have to have witnesses, or he would say he

was the one defending himself." As Seth was talking, trying to figure out some way to make this work out, Leo gave him a quick shake of the head. "There must be a way. I don't care how bad I get hurt. I don't want Theo to worry or Ace to be scared."

"Seth," Theo said from behind him, and Seth realized that Leo had tried to warn him he was there.

"I guess I got a big mouth," Seth said turning to Theo. As expected, he looked mad.

"I'll leave you to it," Leo said and went to join Andy.

"What the hell was that?" Theo wanted to know.

He got kind of loud, so Seth told him, "If you're going to yell, let's take this over that way." He pointed to the woods on the south side of the house where they didn't have any eggs hidden.

From the way that he stalked ahead of him, Seth could tell that Theo couldn't wait to lay into him. When they were far enough away, he wheeled on Seth. "Why were you talking about getting hurt? What the hell, Seth?"

"Sorry, but I wanted to do something that would get that Jerry put away. I thought if I let him beat on me..."

"You're unbelievable," Theo said between gritted teeth. "We already have a way to get rid of him – selling the house."

"I don't want that. The house belongs to you and Ace. It's your home," Seth told him.

"You think I want you to get hurt so I don't lose the house? What the hell!"

"I know you wouldn't want it, but I just want to do something."

"You're not a punching bag. Why was your first instinct to sacrifice yourself?" Theo said.

"It was all I could think of," Seth told him.

"Well think again. I'm not letting you do anything stupid." Theo grabbed his arms hard. "No one gets to hurt you," he said even as his grip on Seth was almost bruising.

Just as suddenly as he grabbed him, Theo let go. He took a few aimless steps then came to face Seth again. "You said you wanted to do something for us? Don't you know you already are? I'm depending on you more all the time."

"I want to be here for you."

"Then be here, not in a hospital bed." Theo became stern and deadly serious again. "Tell me you're dropping this idea."

After a moment, Seth nodded. "I don't have much choice," he told Theo honestly. "Not if it would cause more pain for you and Ace, and in the end, it might not even work."

His answer was enough to satisfy Theo. "Good," Theo said and he let out a relieved breath.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to add to your troubles," Seth said and took Theo's hand and kissed the palm then each of his fingers.

Theo slumped forward and leaned his head on Seth's shoulder. "This is why I can't let anything happen to you. So I can do this." Theo moved closer and wrapped his arms around him. "And this." Theo kissed his cheek then his mouth, then he pushed his tongue inside.

Taking a breath, their mouths only inches apart, Seth gazed into Theo's eyes. "I want to be here for this too," Seth said before getting back to kissing him.

That night while the Easter party at Mrs. Del Rio's was still going on, Theo texted that he was leaving Ace there and coming to the inn to pick him up. When Seth went over to the truck, Theo moved over to the passenger side.

Seth thought that maybe he wanted to talk, but he had something else in mind. As soon as Seth got them on the road, Theo leaned over to his side of the car and nuzzled his ear. His hand slid under Seth's clothes and over his chest. As Theo's fingers brushed over his nipples, his teeth nibble on his earlobe, and Seth shivered.

"So this is why you had me drive," Seth said, his voice rough, his dick hard.

"I wanted my hands free," Theo said. He pulled even closer and his lips fluttered against the side of Seth's neck.

Slowly, Theo's hand moved down over his abs, lower all the time until he reached down to cup Seth's hard cock. Then he spoke right in his ear, "Want me to suck you off?"

"Talking that way, you'll make me crash," Seth said.

Theo pointed to a secluded spot off the road. "Park over there. Sounds to me like you can't handle driving and getting your cock sucked."

"No, I can't," Seth admitted. As it was he was having trouble driving straight and thought he might plow them right into a tree. Thankfully they came to a stop safely and he shut off the engine.

In the darkness, their lips met too suddenly, bruising, mouths devouring as Theo unzipped Seth's fly and freed his cock. Next Theo's hand was on it and Seth couldn't help thrusting into his fist.

Seth didn't want to stop kissing him no matter how much he wanted Theo's mouth on his cock. Theo didn't give him a choice.

His hand sliding up and down Seth's shaft, Theo licked his lips then bent down to swiped his tongue over the tip. Seth pushed his hair back so he could watch and play with it.

Theo's tongue started sweeping up and down over the length of his cock then Theo took him in his mouth. The hot pressure of his mouth

felt amazing and Seth groaned.

Theo's head moved up and down in his lap while Seth rubbed his hand over his back and called his name. Sucking slow and deep, Theo hummed and moaned around his cock.

Seth felt the need to come building then becoming unbearable as Theo started moving faster, sucking harder. Now Seth was cursing and calling Theo's name finishing with a loud moan as a surge of hot pleasure shot through him.

Head thrown back, he was breathing hard, the image of Theo swallowing his come fresh on his mind. Catching his breath, he pushed Theo back and leaned down so he could take his cock in his mouth.

He did it slow while working the underside with his tongue. Theo dug his fingers into his shoulder and panted, "I need that. I need it so much."

Urged on by his voice, Seth sucked and rolled his balls in his hand. In his greed, Seth took him too far down his throat then had to pull back. But it felt kind of good to have Theo deep inside him, so he tried it again.

Theo's moans drove him even deeper. Seth gripped his thighs hard and let Theo's cock fill his throat again and again. He was dizzy from it and hard all over again.

He started sucking hard and fast and stroking his own cock in the same rhythm. Then Theo's hands were tight in his hair and they were both coming. Seth swallowed every drop then collapsed with his head in Theo's lap.

"I can't believe you did that," Theo said.

"I didn't know I could, but I liked it," Seth told him.

"I liked it too," Theo said with a chuckle then he got some napkins from the glove compartment, and took Seth's hand. He wiped it off then bent down to kiss Seth. "Can you drive us to the party now?"

"Just barely," Seth told him. He sat up and made himself as decent as he could.

As he started up the truck, he put his arm around Theo, pulling him close. Theo rested his head on his shoulder then he looked up at him.

"You're going to have to wipe that smile off your face by the time we get there," Theo warned him.

"I don't think I can. You make me feel too good and I just can't hold it inside." It was true, but there was more to it than that. He felt such joy at being with Theo and such painful longing when he was away from him. He was just afraid to put a name to it.

Chapter 29

They had only just arrived home from work and brought Ace home, and Theo was planning to go out again. Ace ran inside to see Butter. Theo stayed by the truck and told Seth, "I'm going into town. I'll get dinner from the café and talk to Mrs. Del Rio. I called and made sure she had time to meet with me."

Seth didn't like hearing that. "So you'll sell the house."

Resigned to it, Theo nodded. "Yes. I just need to find out if Mrs. Del Rio is still interested in buying."

"It's a family home. It's a shame for you to let it go."

"Money is what my aunt and her boyfriend are after. Once they have it, they'll leave us alone. But I might only be able to give up my half ownership of the house to Aunt Cindy. I don't know if she would settle for that. First I have to find out where Mrs. Del Rio stands in all this then figure out the next step." Feeling overwhelmed, Theo took a deep breath and Seth rubbed his back.

After everything that happened and what Seth tried to do, Theo knew he had to find a permanent solution. He drove into town with a heavy heart.

The peach trees were starting to bloom, and that meant the café was very busy. Theo had noticed the same thing at the inn.

As he went into the cafe, he saw that Rico and Sam were there but Hannah was the one manning the counter and handling his order. She was smirking at him in triumph the whole time.

As preoccupied as he was, Theo didn't have the patience to deal with her mind games. He was just going to ignore her, but Rico noticed something was up.

"What's with you?" he asked Hannah.

"Just patting myself on the back. I got Theo here to notice Seth," Hannah claimed.

"I noticed him just fine," Theo told her.

"Have you been matchmaking?" Sam demanded of her then pointed an accusing finger at Rico. "This is your influence."

Rico dismissed that. "Nah. She's doing her own thing." But then he eyed Theo. "So things are progressing between you and Seth?"

Theo wasn't going to get into that, but Hannah jumped in. "Sure are. They just needed a little kick in the pants. That's why Seth needs a pushy girl like me taking up for him. And don't tell me I didn't get

things moving between you two," she said to Theo, but he wasn't about to give her any credit.

Thank God Mrs. Del Rio came out to speak to him. They sat down at one of the tables to talk. It turned out she was willing to buy the house, but she wasn't eager to do it.

"I hate to see you sell it. You know if I do buy the house, you can still live in it," she said.

"Thank you. Having a stable residence would help me get custody," Theo told her. "I don't want to give in to my aunt, but I need them gone. My aunt brought her boyfriend to the house, and he tried to take Ace with them by force."

"He what?" she said too loudly then smiled at the customers at nearby tables.

"I'm not sure if my aunt wanted that, but when her boyfriend grabbed Ace's arm, Seth was ready to tear him apart. I want them gone before something really bad happens. I just have to figure out how to make sure my aunt keeps her part of the deal."

"My God, they want to use Ace as a hostage," Mrs. Del Rio said, appalled.

"And they're going to get what they're after. I can't risk losing Ace to her. It's just the way it has to be," Theo said.

"I'll do whatever I can to help you, honey," Mrs. Del Rio said.

"You already helped us so much. Thank you."

His order was ready, and Theo picked it up and left. He had only taken a few steps away from the café when Jerry accosted him.

"Get the hell away from me," Theo said and tried to get around him, but Jerry wouldn't let him.

"You trying to run? You better listen up and do as you're told or you're gonna be in a world of hurt," Jerry threatened.

Theo sighed. He was ready to agree to what they wanted, but this idiot didn't know it, and Theo couldn't tell him. First he had to figure out how to make sure his aunt gave up any claim to Ace.

"I have nothing to discuss with you," Theo told him and tried to walk away again. Jerry got in his way, and Theo had to force himself to unclench his fist and not deck him. He had to keep his cool no matter what.

Out of the corner of his eye, Theo saw Mrs. Del Rio step out of the café. "Mr. Atkins, I'm sorry you aren't willing to sell to me. I hope you'll change your mind," she said.

Since that was obviously a lie, Theo played along. "We'll see," he said to her. What was she doing?

"And who is this handsome gentleman?" Mrs. Del Rio asked while smiling at Jerry. "If you are a friend of young Mr. Atkins, maybe you can get him to see reason. I've made him a very nice offer for his

house. He won't get a better one."

With a small wave of the hand, she signaled to Theo that he should go. She kept talking to Jerry and Theo walked away. It looked like Mrs. Del Rio was getting chummy with him, but she was probably just distracting him so Theo could leave.

Theo went home and had dinner with Seth and Ace. They hung out, Ace played some video games and Seth played with Butter. There was still a little time before Ace's bedtime when Theo got a call.

It was Rico. "Come over to my grandmother's. I can't even... Just come by."

Theo thought back to the last time he had seen Mrs. Del Rio, when she was talking to Jerry. This couldn't have anything to do with that. That's what he told himself, but...

"I need to go see Mrs. Del Rio again," Theo said while Seth frowned at him. He could tell something was off, but with Ace there, he didn't ask. "Don't let Ace weasel out of his bedtime," he told Seth and then he left.

Theo planned to text him to let him know what was going on, but for now he just drove to Mrs. Del Rio's house. Before he even got close, he saw red and blue lights. The driveway to her house was blocked by a sheriff's cars. Theo parked and went closer on foot.

He texted Rico to let him know he was there. His reply told him to go around to the back. Theo made his way to the back garden. The police activity was all inside while Rico was standing outside with Andy. Why was Andy there?

"Is your grandmother OK?" Theo asked Rico.

"Insane, but OK," Rico told him.

"What happened?"

Rico just shook his head so Andy answered. "According to my aunts, they dropped by Mrs. Del Rio's and saw that there was an extremely drunk and belligerent man there so they refused to leave her alone with him. Mrs. Del Rio invited the man to have a little chat and resolve some property dispute amicably, but he drank too much then pulled a gun and demanded she open her safe. When he turned to look inside the open safe, Mrs. Del Rio hit him over the head with a marble urn containing her late father's ashes."

"What man?" Theo asked, but he suspected he already knew the answer.

Rico gave him his name. "Jeremy Phillips. Grandma said he was your aunt's boyfriend and that he was bad news."

"He is. He came by the house and tried to grab Ace. I was telling your grandmother about that just today," Theo told him.

"That's not a coincidence," Rico said.

"What is going on?" Theo asked.

"Something fishy, I can tell you that much," Rico said, keeping his voice down.

Andy sighed. "Mrs. Del Rio and my aunts are giving their statements. That man has been taken to the hospital."

Sheriff Jackson wanted to speak to Theo as well, but he couldn't tell her much other than that the real estate deal might have had to do with the sale of the house and that Jerry was violent and abusive. The sheriff told them that Jerry was still unconscious.

Once she had gone back inside, Andy didn't show much sympathy for Jerry. "Going up against Mrs. Del Rio, he should consider himself lucky to be alive."

"He didn't go up against her. He was set up," Rico hissed under his breath.

"What do you mean?" Theo said as he remembered how Mrs. Del Rio had been sweet-talking Jerry and pretending she wanted him to persuade Theo to sell.

"Think about it. This guy was a threat to you and Ace," Rico said.

"You are being paranoid," Andy told him.

"This is Grandma's MO. She is one sneaky old lady," Rico said then he pointed back toward the house just as his grandmother and Andy's great-aunts came out. "Let's get to the bottom of this."

"Are you all right?" Theo asked the ladies.

"Just in need of a drink or two," Andy's great-aunt Bridgette said. She pointed at Andy. "As soon as we get home, you're playing bartender."

"So what went on tonight?" Rico demanded of his grandmother.

"Why was Jerry here?" Theo asked her more gently.

"I invited him over for drinks and negotiations," Mrs. Del Rio told him.

"Negotiations?" Theo said.

"I might have led him to believe that me and the Brighton twins wanted to do business," Mrs. Del Rio pointed to Andy's aunts. "That we wanted to buy up a few properties outside of town, build a golf course and a clubhouse. And of course we needed his help prying the Atkins property from you. But that man just couldn't hold his liquor."

"And the next thing you know, he ends up face down in front of your open safe with a cracked skull and an unregistered weapon in his hand. How clumsy of him," Rico said pointedly.

"That just shows how greed can be a man's undoing. We offered to pay him for his assistance," Andy's great-aunt Beryl said.

Andy didn't seem to believe her. He rubbed his temples and sighed. "I'm going to ask the sheriff if I can take you home and also look for a wall to slam my head against."

"Save me a spot," Rico told him.

Andy went off with his great-aunts, and Theo was left with Mrs. Del Rio and Rico, who was glaring at his grandmother. Theo didn't blame him.

"Mrs. Del Rio, you could have been hurt. With Jerry having a gun..." Theo said but a funny look on her face made him stop.

She shrugged. "You never know when an unregistered gun will come in handy."

"What?" Theo said and looked toward the house where the deputies were still busy probably collecting evidence. Did Mrs. Del Rio just admit she planted a gun on Jerry?

"Just a gift from an old bo," she said like that explained anything.

"One of those gangsters you dated in Vegas," Rico said.

"Mrs. Del Rio, what did you do?" Theo said.

"I couldn't let this go on any longer. The danger to Ace. Your aunt trying to take Ace and the house away from you. It was my fault she wanted you to sell it. That made it my responsibility," Mrs. Del Rio said, but that just wasn't true.

"No, it wasn't your fault at all," Theo told her.

"Well, it's done now," she said. "Now I'll go be a good hostess and see if those nice deputies want anything to eat or drink."

She left with Theo looking after her in disbelief and Rico shaking his head.

Theo turned to him. "This is not a good development. When Jerry figures out he got framed, your grandmother won't be safe from him."

"I know," Rico said. "But he won't find it easy to convince anyone else that he got framed by three old ladies. Who would ever think that my sweet grandma, much less Andy's prim and proper great-aunts would do something like that?"

"So we have to hope he will be stuck in jail," Theo said. "I appreciate what your grandmother did, but this is insane."

"I'll keep you updated with any news," Rico told him and then Theo left.

As he walked to the truck, Theo's head was spinning and he only sent a brief text to Seth that he would talk to him later. When Theo got home, Ace was in bed and Seth was pacing the living room.

Before telling him anything, Theo stepped up to him for a long, tight hug. Since it wasn't so cold any more, they went out to sit on the porch and talk. Theo told him what happened and for a while Seth was just speechless.

"I'm thinking that Mrs. Del Rio might just be a little bit crazy," Seth finally said.

"I still can't wrap my head around it. She felt guilty that she looked into buying the house and put it on Aunt Cindy's radar. I'm not sure

she even knew the house existed before that, but that doesn't make it Mrs. Del Rio's fault. Now I'm worried Jerry might go after her."

"You said she hit him on the head with a marble urn? He might not be doing anything for a while," Seth told him.

"Yeah, but I still don't know what Aunt Cindy is going to do," Theo said while staring up at the night sky. He then turned to Seth. "At least this makes your plan look downright sane in comparison."

"That's something, I guess," Seth said with a crooked smile.

"No, it's not." Theo got up and offered his hand to Seth. "Let's go inside. I'm getting cold out here."

"Warming you up is one of my favorite things," Seth said as he got up and used his hold on Theo's hand to pull him in for a kiss.

They went inside and Theo let Seth hold him for a while. It felt so good and not because Seth had an amazing body. It was because Seth gave him the feeling of someone watching over him, taking care of him.

Chapter 30

Theo didn't know what to think when he heard that Rob and Julian's bachelor party was going to be at Mrs. Del Rio's. Then Ace got invited along with Theo and Seth, as did the other kids. It turned out it wasn't a bachelor party at all, but Ace was excited to go and kept asking what people did at a bachelor party.

When they arrived, Mrs. Del Rio's back yard wasn't as colorful as it had been for the Easter egg hunt. This time the decorations were silver and deep blue plus a lot of lights strung up to crisscross the garden and line the veranda. Even if the colors were more serious, the place still looked very festive.

The kids had taken over the gazebo, and Ace wanted to run over to them. Theo stopped him. "First we say hello to Mrs. Del Rio."

That didn't stop Ace from running, he just ran over to Mrs. Del Rio instead. By the time Seth and Theo got to them, Ace was already chattering at her.

"I want to play poker, but first I have to learn how," Ace was telling her.

"He asked what people do at bachelor parties. I told him, 'Play poker,'" Theo explained once Ace went to join the other kids.

"I can make that happen," Mrs. Del Rio said with a wicked grin. "I'm afraid it won't be strip poker with this crowd. Have you heard the news about your aunt's boyfriend? He's awake now, but he's confused about what happened. He did guzzle down a lot of my good scotch so I'm not surprised."

"That plus the head trauma," Theo said. He still couldn't believe what she did.

"That too. He's all mixed up and keeps changing his story. And it turns out he was out on parole. It does not look good for him or for your aunt. Her boyfriend is blaming her for being in this mess. When your aunt heard, she thought he was trying to make a deal to testify against her like she was behind the robbery. So she told them about an armed robbery he was involved in and was never caught for."

"Did the sheriff deliberately turn them against each other?" Theo wondered. "This doesn't mean my aunt will give up on the house."

"I did put out the word that I've soured on the deal and don't want the house any more," Mrs. Del Rio said.

"Ace can still testify that she hit him. Hopefully that will be enough now that she doesn't have Jerry egging her on," Theo said, but he hadn't heard from his aunt and that worried him.

They went over to say hi to Sam, Wyatt and Rico, who was in the middle of ranting. "A bachelor party at my grandma's! Just listen to how wrong that sounds." Rico shuddered.

"We didn't have a bachelor party either," Sam said.

"I made it up to Sam ten times over," Wyatt bragged and winked at his husband.

"The invitation we got didn't say bachelor party," Theo said as he greeted them. "If everyone stopped calling it that, there would be no problem."

Wyatt dismissed that idea. "That's way too rational for Rico."

Sam agreed. "Rico was looking forward to tormenting Julian and Rob, and his fun has been spoiled."

Sam was giving Rico a harsh look, but he was distracted by the newest arrivals. "Oh my God, there is a baby at the bachelor party. For the love of all that is unholy."

"The kids are happy to see her," Seth said seeing all the kids run over to Leo, Andy and his two great-aunts, one of whom was holding Lucy.

After greeting Mrs. Del Rio, Andy and Leo made it over to them. "Your grandmother said something about organizing a poker game," Leo said to Rico.

"Just don't get suckered into playing poker with any of these old ladies, they're beasts," Rico warned him. Then he pointed to Leo and Andy. "You two are getting the most indecent bachelor party ever."

"We'll elope," Andy threatened.

"You causing trouble again?" Mitch asked coming over and putting an arm around Rico, and he mellowed out right away.

"I got my bachelor party revenge," Rico said with a shrug. "I sent a truckload of sex toys and porn to Julian and Rob."

"Is that why Julian looks like he wants to kill you?" Wyatt asked pointing out that they arrived just as a cheer went up for the would be grooms.

Danny and Lenny ran over to the kids, and Julian and Rob went around to greet guests. When they came over to their group, Julian lit into Rico, "What the hell did you send to our house, Rico?"

"You already got it? Woo hoo!" Rico was celebrating but Julian really did look like he wanted to kill him.

"I have never been more embarrassed opening a package in my life," Julian told him.

"You're welcome," Rico said.

Rob didn't look as put out as Julian. In fact he was smirking. Sam was shaking his head at Rico though.

"I had to administer an antidote for this," Rico said as he gestured

around. "Kids and dogs running everywhere, elderly people lounging all over the place, and a baby."

"Everyone is having a good time, that's all that counts," Rob told him and he kissed Julian on the cheek. "This is the kind of party that feels right to me. I did plenty of wild partying, and I never felt right with myself until I met this man."

"That's how I feel," Julian told him. "Danny gave me back one part of myself, and you did the rest. I feel whole with you."

Rob nodded understanding him perfectly. "That's what you did for me. God, I love being in sync with you." He now kissed Julian properly.

The exchange had left Rico speechless, and the rest of them kind of embarrassed. Sam didn't get a chance to get embarrassed by the two fiancés. Wyatt embarrassed him even more by wrapping him in his arms and nuzzling his neck and saying he loved him over and over again.

"This is revenge, isn't it?" Rico said. "All of you getting shmoopy. Well I can't be embarrassed. I love my man more than any of you."

"Same here," Mitch told him in a very low key way, but his eyes were blazing.

During all this, Andy looked like he wanted to disappear and Leo grinned at him devilishly.

The whole thing just brought questions to Theo's mind. Since Seth didn't know where to look, Theo dragged him away from there.

Seeing the dogs over by the gazebo, Theo knew Seth was dying to go pet them. He went with him to where the kids were playing at throwing a wedding. They were arguing about who should get married. The dogs were the top contenders, and Seth got down to pet them while they were still single.

"People around here sure like getting married," Seth said.

"People get married to be happy," DJ told him wisely and some of the other kids nodded.

"That sounds about right I guess," Seth said and they left the kids to their fun.

"People are already starting to dance," Seth noticed as the two of them were milling around.

"You asking me to dance?" Theo said, but Seth didn't get to answer as Lara and Noreen came over.

Noreen was worried about Aunt Cindy and Jerry, and Theo couldn't give her any definite answers.

"Is this aunt the one Gloria was talking about when she said you were gonna beat up a lady?" Lara asked Noreen.

Noreen shook her head. "No one messes with my students. You can take that however you want."

Theo and Seth then got to talk to Rob while Julian was saying goodnight to Lucy and smiling as he held her tiny hand.

"Look at how that baby is smiling at Julian. She has good taste," Rob said.

"Babies are nice, but are you two going to regret not having a real bachelor party?" Theo asked him. "We can always drag you guys off somewhere for some more adult fun. I'm sure Rico would jump at the chance."

"I bet he would, but actually Mrs. Del Rio was ready to throw a proper bachelor party for us, bring in an army of strippers and everything, but I knew Julian wasn't up for that. He was dreading the bachelor party, but he didn't want to spoil everyone's fun."

"So you rescued him," Theo said.

"And made Rico spaz out. Don't forget that," Rob said. "I wouldn't mind a bachelor party, but I want Julian to be happy."

"Damn, that's sweet," Seth said. "I can see why you two are getting married."

"Are you a romantic at heart?" Theo asked him once they were off by themselves.

"Am I? I don't really know." Seth seemed to be thinking about it. "Maybe here I am."

"Here?"

"In Peach Tree and with you and Ace. Here I don't have everybody looking down on me and judging me, expecting the worst from me."

At that, Theo grumbled. "I don't know. I've been pretty hard on you." Theo didn't feel proud of how he acted, but Seth was ready to let him off the hook.

"Nah, that's just your natural standoffishness. You haven't been so bad." That wasn't exactly high praise.

"Might want to ease off on the flattery," Theo told him.

Seth laughed. "You're great. You know I think the world of you."

Hearing that only made Theo feel more guilty. "I haven't been fair to you." That was because he wanted too much, and now he knew it. He wanted Seth to be his undeniably, completely, not to have him wake up one day and realize he didn't like men after all. Theo just couldn't figure him out, and then he almost drove him away.

Seeing him looking remorseful, Seth nudged him. "You couldn't have been that bad. I'm still here," he said with a smile.

"And you won't get it into your head to leave again?" Theo stared at him hard.

"I was just trying to do right by you and Ace," Seth said to defend himself.

"Then stick around."

"I came back because of that Jerry. You sure you want me back for real?"

Actually Theo thought he was already back for real, and he didn't like hearing that Seth had any doubt about that. "Yes, I want you back," Theo said, but he didn't say the rest, that he never wanted him to leave again.

"We didn't dance," Seth reminded him.

"Did you want to?" Theo asked since it seemed to him he hesitated before.

"In front of everyone we know. Just sort of feels like..."

"Wrong?" Theo said.

"No, good. Too good. If I'm holding you like that, I'll get carried away," Seth said and Theo laughed, relieved and flattered.

"I promise to keep things under control," Theo said and they went to where the others were dancing.

Seth looked shy as they started to slow dance together. "I forgot to tell you I didn't know how to do this kind of dancing either."

"Too late now. We're already doing it," Theo told him.

"And I'm doing it right?" Seth asked.

"You're taking my breath away." Theo made it sound like he was kidding, but it was true. The way Seth held him, the way he looked into his eyes, he made Theo lose himself in him.

Chapter 31

Seth and Theo were on their way back from work with Ace. He was telling them what he had been up at school and afterward when he went to Lara's with Gloria. They made something called cake pops, and Seth had to admit, his ears perked up. He was ready to ask for a recipe if Theo wasn't giving him a look.

As they were making their way down the driveway to the house, Ace suddenly went silent and Seth saw why. Their aunt's car was parked in front of the house. It looked like she was alone as she leaned against the hood with her arms folded.

Getting out to go talk to her, Theo told Ace, "Go inside with Seth."

Ace didn't say anything, but he looked unhappy as they went in. Butter greeted them at the door, and she took some of the gloom from his face. While Ace took care of her water and food and petted her, Seth rummaged in the fridge for what to make for dinner, but the whole time he was worrying about what was going on outside.

He stopped when he heard the car outside start up and waited for Theo to come in. Ace was the first to ask, "What did she want? I don't want to go with her."

"You don't have to," Theo said and he cupped his face and kissed the top of his head. "It sounds like she has given up on that, and the lawyer is making sure of it. OK?"

"OK," Ace said.

"You said you didn't get all you homework done at Lara's. Go get started on that. Me and Seth are going to make dinner," Theo told him.

With him gone, Theo told Seth more about what went on with their aunt. "She was telling me how she was washing her hands of us, and doing some ranting, saying Ace and I were a curse on her family, that we ruined Mom's life and some stuff about dad."

"Good thing you sent Ace inside," Seth said and took his hand.

"I'm afraid he might have already heard that kind of thing from her." Theo sighed. "She didn't mention the house, but she did say we better not lie about her. I'm pretty sure she was talking about how she hit Ace. The main thing is that she said she didn't ever want to see us again, and I consider that good news."

"I hope she'll be gone for good," Seth said. Though it seemed wrong to him to wish away family, for her he made an exception.

"There's nothing here for her. With all the trouble her boyfriend has had here and finding out there's no buyer for the house, she has no

reason to stick around," Theo said.

Seth hugged him and felt relief pass through both of them. He just wanted Theo and Ace to finally be happy.

During dinner, Seth talked to Ace about the wedding they were going to that Sunday. They made bets about how big the cake was going to be. Theo wasn't interested in the cake at all, and the two of them just didn't understand it.

"I'll look up the record for the biggest wedding cake ever. Good enough?" Theo asked trying to make up for it with research. "Hey, there's a cake that cost 50 million bucks."

"No way," Ace said and rushed over to look at Theo's phone.

Seth couldn't believe it either. When he and Theo were in the kitchen doing dishes, he had a look for himself.

"Well I'll be..."

Theo laughed at him then kissed him. "I'm done talking about cakes, alright," he told Seth.

"You taste better than any cake," Seth told him and he put his arms around him. Then he kissed Theo just as Ace came in.

"I saw you! You were kissing!" Ace said pointing an accusing finger at them though there was no one else around he could be talking about. "You didn't tell me you were boyfriends."

"We're boyfriends. There, now you know," Theo told him.

Seth blinked not sure if he meant it, and when Ace ran off, Theo turned to him and explained, "It's easier for Ace to understand it that way."

"So you didn't mean it," Seth said, disappointment hitting him hard.

"I don't want to explain the concept of friends with benefits to him," Theo said and Seth's heart just kept sinking.

"Is that what we are?" Seth asked.

"I... We're something. I don't have a word for it," Theo said looking away. If he didn't know, how was Seth supposed to?

When they were alone and Ace was asleep, Seth thought about talking to Theo, trying to get some kind of answer out of him. But he only wanted one answer – for what he said to Ace to be true.

In his head, Seth was still hearing him say that they were boyfriends. That made him wonder what Theo might do with a boyfriend that he didn't do with him. He couldn't really think of anything.

They were sitting together on the small couch. Theo was looking at something that had to do with writing computer code. Seth had started watching some movie, but he wasn't interested in anything

except Theo. He noticed that Theo twisted like his back was bothering him. It was probably because of the way he hunched over the laptop.

Sneaking a hand behind him, Seth started rubbing circles over his back. He made sure not to do it too gently or Theo would think he was hitting on him. Moving his hand up, he rubbed his shoulder. When Theo let out a groan, Seth pressed into that spot a little more.

He was using both hands now, and Theo turned to make it easier. After a while, Seth worked his way lower again, but Theo grabbed one of his hands and pulled it forward toward his crotch.

Seth didn't let him. He didn't want Theo thinking that was what he was after all along.

"Are you teasing me?" Theo said.

"Not me. I'm just trying to be good to you," Seth told him.

"Does a foot rub come with that?"

"Sure," Seth leaned down to grab for his feet but Theo pulled them back.

"I was kidding," Theo said.

Seth was disappointed, but then he leaned down again and lightly trailed his fingertips over Theo's feet, tugged on his socks a little. "You sure?"

"You're trying to seduce me," Theo said and reminded Seth that he didn't want him thinking that.

He straightened quickly and said, "No." That made Theo look at him funny and set aside his laptop. Before he could say anything, Seth asked him, "What are you looking for?"

"What do you mean?" Theo said.

"In a guy. I mean a guy you could see being with forever."

"I'll know it when I find it." Theo said, telling him nothing. Then he turned it around on Seth. "And you?"

Seth couldn't tell him that he already found what he was after. "I'm not looking for anything. Just as long as I get to be around you, that's good enough for me."

"And that's all you want?"

Seth didn't want to say too much, but he couldn't help speaking from the heart. "I always want to be where you are."

"You make it sound like your whole world revolves around me," Theo said like he didn't believe that could be true. But it was.

Seth smiled sadly. He just couldn't deny the truth. "Maybe that's just how it is. And how I want it. I don't know much, but I do know that I don't want to be any further from you than this."

"Don't you want something that's just for you?" Theo said and stared at him with his brow furrowed like he was trying to add up some hard math in his head.

"I don't know how to explain it." Seth cast his eyes all around then he

noticed the trees out in the darkness out the window. "It's like a tree has roots in the ground. It doesn't have to wonder where it's going or what it's going to do with itself. I feel like that when I'm with you. Like you're holding me right where I need to be and..." He trailed off. That feeling of rightness wouldn't stay with him if Theo said he didn't want him. Just at the thought of it, his chest felt like there was a concrete slab pressing down on it.

Seth shut his eyes and then felt Theo's hand on his, their fingers entwining. Opening his eyes, looking at him, Seth got the most incredible feeling of being held in his steady gaze and knowing where he needed to be.

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Theo knew he started this when he called them boyfriends then took it back. The word had scared him. His own feelings scared him, but now Seth was telling him how he felt, and Theo wished he had told him the truth.

"I wasn't expecting this," Theo said though he hated to break the spell.

"I'm sorry if I said more than I should have," Seth told him. "I just can't help thinking that you're amazing, and..."

Theo stopped him with a finger to his lips. "It's my turn. You're the one who is amazing. I should have told you."

"I'm nothing special," Seth said looking down at their clasped hands.

"Yes, you are, I was just too afraid of what I felt to let you know. I didn't want to be hurt," Theo admitted.

Seth held his hand tighter. "I would never hurt you."

"Or leave me?" Theo asked.

"I won't leave. I'll stick with you no matter what," Seth promised.

"If we have anything to overcome, we'll do it together," Theo said, needing more reassurance.

"Together. Yes. That sounds good," Seth said and leaned in to kiss him.

But Theo had more to say so he only let himself enjoy the kiss for a little while then drew back. "All this time I refused to listen to my heart, now I feel like it's going to burst if I don't speak up and tell you how I feel. You have to know, I don't just want you here because you're wonderful and I need you. Seth, I love you."

Seth stared at him, blinking then he crushed Theo to him, his hot breath in his hair. "Theo. Theo." It sounded like Seth was sobbing his name. Theo pulled back a little and he saw that Seth had tears in his eyes. "Theo, I love you too. I love you so much." He clutched Theo to him again like he was never going to let him go.

Theo needed to make a little space so he could kiss him though.

Their mouths melded, tongues explored unhurriedly. When the long kiss ended, Theo knew exactly what he wanted to do and he couldn't wait another second.

He pulled Seth up to his feet and led him to the bedroom. Once he had him in there with the door closed, Theo told him, "I want you to fuck me, but we'll have to be quiet."

"I've never..."

"You're afraid to fuck me?" Theo could see that he was.

"I didn't have good self control when you were fucking me," Seth said looking embarrassed.

"You afraid you'll hurt me," Theo said and he cupped his face and brushed his thumb over his lips. "I'm not."

"I wouldn't on purpose. But I couldn't get enough of you. If I was inside you, I might go right out of my mind," Seth said and he grabbed him around the waist. Raw desire was written in his eyes, but Theo wasn't scared of that at all.

"I'm willing to risk it." He pressed himself against Seth to show him. Then he asked, "You liked getting fucked, didn't you?"

Seth smiled and nodded. "You were incredible."

"It's going to be like that for me too," Theo told him.

"Because we're good together?" Seth asked, still smiling.

"Yes," Theo told him and he kissed him.

Locking the door, they undressed each other slowly. Theo wanted to enjoy every moment, every inch of Seth. His cock was straining against his jeans until Seth freed it and caressed it, making Theo thrust into his hand.

Theo reached for his cock too, released it from his jeans and boxers and moaned as he felt it so thick and rock hard. Wanting to taste him, Theo sat on the edge of the bed, kissed his way down his abs and took him in his mouth. He didn't suck Seth for long though, just long enough to turn himself on even more.

Getting up, he got the lube and looked forward to being skin to skin with Seth. Back in his arms, he let Seth pull off the rest of his clothes then watched him get his jeans and boxers off. God he was beautiful and his eyes were burning into Theo like he would eat him alive.

Back on the bed, Theo got on his hands and knees offering Seth his ass so he could lube him. Seth started out tentatively, like he was teasing him, but soon he was stretching him properly, almost making him come.

While Seth fingered him, he leaned over and started to kiss from the base of his spine up to his shoulders then the back of his neck. Seth's warm breath tickled the nape of his neck, and he shivered in anticipation.

Theo was so ready and he wanted him so much, but Seth only kissed

his back and moaned against his spine.

"Seth," Theo demanded or maybe begged.

Instead of giving him what he wanted, Seth turned him over so he was lying on his back. He loomed over Theo, giving him quick kisses while he breathed hard.

"I need to look at you," Seth said, moving lower. He pushed Theo's legs apart then up.

Theo groaned as Seth hooked his legs over his shoulders and got closer, ready to fuck him. Theo had tried both topping and bottoming before now, but that was all he did – try it. He didn't give himself over to it the way he was giving himself to Seth.

Breathing hard, Seth brushed the head of his cock over his hole. Theo was ready to beg again then he felt Seth start to press against his opening.

He told himself to relax, not to moan too loud, but it wasn't easy as the head of Seth's cock opened him up. Every inch of him was alive with the need for this so Theo didn't care about the pain. It was there though no matter how careful Seth was being.

Seth went slow while Theo panted and held his gaze, silently telling him to keep going. And he did until he was filling him up.

Deep inside him, Seth stopped. He grunted with the effort of not thrusting and Theo clutched at his ass and breathed, waiting for his body to adjust to how big Seth was, to welcome the fullness.

To let Seth know he could start to move, Theo started rocking under him. Seth matched the motion before he pulled back. He rubbed his hands up and down the backs of Theo's thighs then cupped his ass before pushing back in.

His thrusts were steady but picking up power, until Seth was slamming into him and Theo was going out of his mind. His whole being was charged with so much arousal while the air was filled with the sounds their bodies made.

Speeding up his rhythm while still fucking him hard, Seth was gleaming with sweat, every muscle defined with the effort. Theo couldn't take much more. He was coming apart then he was just coming.

It wasn't easy not to scream out as his whole body clenched and his back arched off the bed. But Seth had a firm hold of him as he kept fucking him and came inside him hard. Filling him with come, Seth called his name in a harsh whisper, and Theo reached up to pull him down for a kiss.

He didn't know how he had the strength because in the next instant his arms and legs were made of lead. Seth took care of clean up then he even went to check on Ace and reported he was sleeping soundly.

Climbing back into bed with him, Seth lay on his side, propped up

on his elbow. Theo had trouble keeping his eyes open, but he could tell Seth was staring at him pretty hard.

"I think I could look at your eyes forever," Seth told him.

"I'll be closing them in a minute to go to sleep," Theo told him with a smile.

"All right then I'll do this." Seth leaned over him and kissed his eyes closed.

Turning the lamp off, Seth lay down properly, and Theo turned over to drape himself over him. Resting his head on Seth's chest, Theo felt a strong arm go around him and Seth moan contentedly, "Theo." The sound of his name rumbled through Seth's chest mixing with the beating of his heart. "I love you."

That was a beautiful sound. "I love you too," Theo told him and went to sleep with those words on his lips.

Chapter 32

Through his half open eyelids, Seth saw the two new suits hanging together on a hook on the wall. They reminded him that they were going to Julian and Rob's wedding today, but most of his attention was on what Theo was doing to him.

He woke Seth with the feeling of his cock sliding between Theo's lips. Now his head was bobbing and Seth felt the motion as he played with his hair. But he couldn't hold out for long. The tight, wet pressure of Theo's mouth just felt too good and he was coming, biting back his moans as he watched Theo swallow.

Reaching for him as he tried to catch his breath, Seth was surprised to see him getting up. "No. My turn."

"No time," Theo said, but Seth couldn't let him get away.

Jumping out of bed, Seth grabbed him, picked him up and swung him onto the bed. Theo was looking up at him expectantly, but now that he had him where he wanted him, Seth stopped. He only stared down at Theo like he didn't know what to do with him.

Seth's chest was tight, his heart thundering and painful, like he was yearning for something distant and out of reach and not this man lying on his bed.

Slowly Seth lowered himself on top of him and kissed him softly on the mouth. He trailed kisses down his throat and over his chest and abs. He lowered his boxers but went around his cock and rubbed his face against his thigh.

"Is my face too rough. I haven't shave yet," Seth mumbled against Theo's skin.

Theo shivered. "No. It's just right." He raised his hips and clutched at Seth shoulder.

Seth licked him from the tip of his cock to his balls. Theo was his favorite taste, but he knew he couldn't take his time like he wanted to. He wrapped his lips around the head of his cock and started sucking. Letting Theo's cock go deep while he sucked hard, Seth had him coming down his throat in no time.

Theo might be in a hurry, but he took time to kiss Seth thoroughly before he went to shower. Seth looked after him, smiling like a fool. He was so damn happy.

They were serving brunch at Julian and Rob's so he and Theo didn't bother eating and Ace only had some cereal. He was hungry again by the time they started getting ready. Seth split an apple with him. He offered Theo a bite, but he was busy. Theo was tying Seth's tie and

telling them, "Mom and I would play rock paper scissors when we both wanted to tie Dad's tie. I wasn't any good at it, and Mom was hardly any better. After we were done, Dad always had to redo it." Theo smiled at the memory, but hearing what he said, Ace came over to frown at what he was doing. "I'm better at it now," Theo reassured him.

"You have to teach me," Ace said.

"I'll untie it and you can have a go," Seth offered.

"No, you're not undoing my work," Theo said. "Ace, go make sure Butter has water and food then finish getting ready."

"I want to see Ace tie your tie one of these days," Seth said as Ace ran off to the kitchen.

"You like the idea of family traditions, huh," Theo said.

"It's nice to have things to look back on and pass on into the future. I don't have anything left of my family," Seth said. Theo put his hands on his waist and touched his forehead to Seth's.

"You have us!" Ace said, coming back. "Me and Theo aren't a big family, but you can be one of us."

"That sounds good to me," Seth said and he went over to hug Ace. "Thank you."

When he looked back at Theo, they both had tears in their eyes and Seth hugged him too.

"You've been one of us all along," Theo told him as he held him tight.

Peach Tree Hill was bright with the vibrant green of new grass on one side and fruit trees in bloom on the other. Parking in front of the house, they saw it had been decorated with ribbons and streamers in every window.

Julian and Rob were in front, and Seth would swear Julian looked nervous. A sophisticated guy like him getting the jitters on his wedding day, Seth wouldn't have expected that.

When Seth, Theo and Ace went to greet them, Rob was still rubbing Julian's back to comfort him. They heard Julian say to him, "I love you so much, I just want to cry."

Seth was embarrassed that he heard that, but then again this whole day was about how much those two loved each other.

If Theo was uncomfortable, he didn't show it. He went right ahead and told the grooms how happy they were to be there. With a burst of noise, the kids ran around the corner of the house, and Ace went to join them.

"They don't slow down for anything," Rob said as the kids ran off.

"That's good. The kids are keeping Danny from being too nervous," Julian said. "And Rob is doing the same thing for me." He gave Rob a

sweet smile.

"I heard you can't have too many people in the orchard for the wedding. Thank you for including us," Theo said.

"Julian could change that rule for his own wedding," Rob pointed out.

"I have a lot of people I know through work coming to the reception, but I wanted to keep the actual wedding to just close friends and family," Julian said.

"We are honored to be here," Theo told them.

On such an important occasion, Seth found himself tongue-tied. He was glad Theo knew the right things to say.

They left the grooms in front and went inside the house. There were more decorations in there, as well as some of the guests. They got introduced to Rob's sister and his dad as well as his dad's girlfriend and her family, including a little baby.

"There'll be two babies at this wedding," Sam said. "And Rico is jealous."

"We should have invited a herd of babies," Rico said to Mitch.

"Because having babies start crying in the middle of a ceremony is so much fun?" Noreen said. She was sipping a fizzy drink and nibbling on something, and that reminded Seth they hadn't eaten.

A buffet was set up in the dining room with a lot of fancy food. Seth only had half an apple earlier, but he found that he was too nervous to eat anything.

"My stomach is all in knots. You'd think I was the one getting married," he said to Theo.

"I think we're supposed to be heading to the ceremony pretty soon. Then you can stuff your face with cake at the reception," Theo told him, laughing at him a little. He put his hand on Seth's lower back, and it reminded him of how Rob had comforted Julian.

Leo, Andy and his great-aunts arrived with the baby, and the kids came in with them. While they went to introduce the two babies to each other, Theo called Ace over so he could get some food.

"There're too many foods. I don't know what to have," Ace said.

"Just have a little bit of this and that," Seth told him.

"And don't get dirty," Theo warned him.

Soon they were called together to make their way to the peach orchard for the ceremony. They all went ahead so they could wait for Julian and Rob. The orchard came into view with sunbeams streaming down between peach trees in bloom. There were white bows tied to branches, but the blossoms were the real decorations.

"The orchard is incredible. I can see why they're having their

wedding here," Seth said as they went toward it with the kids running ahead of them.

"Julian and Rob will be the first ones to get married under the peach trees in bloom," Lara told them.

"And they scheduled the wedding before the trees are supposed to be thinned of some of the blooms," Noreen said.

"The orchard is at its most beautiful right now," Andy said but he was actually gazing at Leo holding Lucy.

"Before Julian took over, visitors weren't allowed, but it was a rite of passage for local kids to sneak up here and risk the wrath of Mrs. York, and Julian's grandfather, when he was alive," Lara told them.

"I was never that kind of kid. Did you do it?" Andy asked Lara.

"Of course. A bunch of times," she said with a shrug.

"Don't brag about committing a crime," Noreen told her.

Arriving at the spot where the ceremony was going to take place. They saw Mrs. Del Rio with Rico, Mitch and Sammy.

"Don't be too nice to her. Your grandma is still in trouble," Rico was telling Sammy, but she denied it, shaking her head.

"No. Grandma wouldn't do anything wrong."

"Is this about what happened with my aunt's boyfriend?" Theo asked Andy under his breath.

"Probably. I haven't forgiven my aunts either. They were so reckless," Andy told him. He then noticed how Theo was frowning. "Don't worry. No one is blaming you. But from what I hear, at least the threat from that man has been neutralized."

"It does seem that he and my aunt will be leaving us in peace now," Theo said and looked toward Ace who was laughing as he and the other kids chased each other all around the peach trees.

By the time Julian and Rob made their appearance, they got the kids to settle down. But now that the kids were quiet, Danny was getting anxious. He was hugging Lenny to him, so Julian picked them up to hold them between him and Rob.

"You ready to give them the boutonnieres you made?" Lara asked. Danny nodded, and she brought out a white box that was decorated with the letters J and R and something else, all drawn in crayon. "Danny decorated the box with your initials and a wedding cake drawing."

Danny looked shy but proud of himself at the same time. He then opened the box and inside there were two small clusters of peach flowers with another flower. When Rob saw them, his eyes got tearful

and he turned to his sister and his dad. "Peach flowers and jasmine, Mom's favorite. I wondered why I smelled jasmine."

"I asked your sister about that," Lara admitted.

"Thank you," Rob told her and hugged her and his sister and his dad, then he hugged Julian and Danny. "These are so beautiful. You did a great job."

Danny jumped down so Julian and Rob could pin the boutonnieres on each other. They did it while their eyes met and they exchanged loving looks. Done, they turned and showed Danny how they looked and he clapped.

It turned out there was a boutonniere for Danny too and one for Lenny that tied to his collar. They posed for some "before" pictures, as Rob called them. While Rob was having his picture taken with his family, Mitch clapped Julian on the shoulder and made him jump.

"Sorry. How are you doing?" Mitch asked him.

"I'm scared out of my mind, and I don't know why. I want this more than anything," Julian said.

"I know the feeling," Mitch told him with a smile.

"I thought it was only Rico who went out of his mind at your wedding?" Julian said.

"He just doesn't keep things bottled up," Mitch said. "You'll feel better when it's a done deal."

Right before the ceremony, Julian and Rob had Danny make his best man speech so he wouldn't have to do it in front of a lot of guests he didn't know. Seth was so nervous for the little guy, he clasped Theo's hand kind of hard and held his breath. Theo squeezed his hand back and nudged his shoulder.

As Julian and Rob held Danny up between them, he spoke very softly. "Rob and Julian are gonna be husbands. And they're gonna be a happy family with me and Lenny." He stopped then said a quiet little, "Yay," and Julian and Rob hugged him.

"You did great," Rob told him and kissed his cheek.

"Your speech was so good," Julian said and gazed at Danny and then at Rob with tears in his eyes.

Now it was time for the ceremony to start and Seth was even more nervous than before. He could feel how important this moment was and how much love went into it. Theo could tell he was shaky and he kept one arm around his waist and the other around Ace's shoulders.

Sammy and Gloria were the flower girls. They threw petals on the path that Julian and Rob would be walking between the peach trees.

Julian walked with Danny by his side, and Rob walked between his sister and his dad.

The justice of the peace, who was also Mrs. Del Rio's boyfriend, talked about the beauty and responsibility of marriage. Then the grooms turned to each other to say their vows.

Julian went first, speaking softly while he held Rob's hand to his heart. "Rob, since the day I met you, you've been my guardian angel. You've given me everything I always wanted and needed and never had before you. You're my sunrise, bright and beautiful, bringing light and hope into my life." He then started to put a wedding ring on Rob's finger. "With this ring, I take you as my husband and promise to love you forever and do everything in my power to make you happy."

Rob kissed his hand, and in that small gesture showed so much passion and love. Then he said his own vows. "Julian, I was just coasting along until I met you, not living any kind of life. Then you came along and filled my heart with happiness and love. With this ring, I make you my husband and the love of my life, and I promise to be yours, give myself to you heart and soul for all time."

They kissed even before the justice of the peace could pronounce them married. As everyone laughed and clapped, Julian looked a little embarrassed about that, but Rob didn't. The two of them were beaming with happiness and everyone rushed to hug them and congratulate them, but Danny was first.

"Are we married together now?" Danny asked and Rob laughed and lifted him high.

"Yes, we're married together," Rob told him.

Rob and Julian were surrounded by their family and friends, sharing good wishes, tears and happiness. And then they were off to the reception.

The reception was at Stone Creek Inn, but going into the hall all decked out for the event, Seth didn't recognize the place. Plus he was there as a guest and that was weird. He kept greeting the servers instead of the other guests.

If he wasn't there with Theo, he wouldn't have known what to do with himself. But Theo knew how to meet and greet, and Seth followed his lead. He still felt like people were looking at him funny, so he must not have been doing too good at faking it.

When he told Theo that, he had a different explanation. "People are ogling you."

Seth didn't think that could be right. If anyone was being ogled it was Theo. "I only see people checking you out, and I wish they'd stop it."

"You could always send a message that I'm taken," Theo said and gave him a wicked smile that made him look indecent and irresistible.

Seth didn't need to be told twice, he put his arm around Theo's waist possessively, and if he caught anyone checking out Theo, he gave them a dirty look.

"Too much," Theo told him after a few people shrank away from them. He didn't let Seth move away though, so he must have meant that he should dial down his scowling.

A little later, the newlyweds arrived to loud cheering and a shower of streamers and confetti. They looked so happy, but they had a lot of people to greet. Seth did not envy them that part of it.

Before sitting down to eat, Seth and Theo visited Ace at the kids' table. Julian and Rob were there too as Danny took his seat. They were just in time to hear Ry's plans for the future.

"I'm gonna marry Sammy," Ry announced.

Sammy flat out denied that. "No."

"Then who you gonna marry?" Ry challenged her.

Sammy was only stumped for half a minute then she had an answer for him. "I'm gonna marry Grandma."

No one was willing to tackle that, but Julian did wonder, "What do kids think marriage is?"

"A big cake then a really long slumber party," Rob told him.

At the mention of cake, Theo looked at Seth.

The food was amazing. Seth had crispy duck leg with braised spring vegetables. Theo had a wild rice stuffed artichoke and amaranth polenta with wild mushrooms. As he was eating, Seth couldn't help studying the dishes as something he might serve instead of just enjoying what he ate.

During the meal, Rob's dad and his sister toasted the happy couple. They talked about Rob's mom, who they lost, and Seth looked over at Theo and took his hand.

Julian was the next to speak, he thanked all the guests and Rob's family in particular. "You made Rob the strong, wonderful man that he is and I am so grateful."

When Rob spoke, he had love but also sadness in his eyes. "Getting married to the man I love with my family and my friends by my side, this is the best day of my life. I raise my glass to all of you who are here and those who couldn't be. Thank you."

With their toasts done, Rob and Julian held each other and it was so clear that they understood exactly what the other one felt.

Soon after that the first dance was announced, and the two of them stepped out onto the dance floor. They danced beautifully, never taking their eyes off each other. Other dancers joined them, and Seth looked over at Theo.

"Do you want to dance?" Seth asked him.

Theo nodded and gave Seth his hand. With so many other people dancing, Seth didn't feel like he stuck out for his lack of dancing skills. And with Theo swaying in his arms, he started to forget all about that.

While they were dancing, the kids came over and stood in front of Seth and Theo all in one group.

Gloria was the first to speak up. "You're boyfriends already?"

"Yes, we are," Theo told her.

"See, it's true," Ace said to the other kids.

"Did you do it all by yourselves?" Sammy asked, frowning at them.

"Uhh. Yes. What?" Theo said, confused.

"You didn't need any help?" Ry asked like he just couldn't believe it.

"No?" Theo said still not understanding why they were being questioned like this.

Dancing over to them in Leo's arms, Andy spoke up. "Hmm, it's almost like adults don't need kids to push them together," he said and he glared at Rico.

He was dancing with Mitch on the other side of them. "What? That's crazy talk," Rico said.

Seth just shrugged at Theo. He didn't know what was going on.

Thank God the cake was brought out and the kids forgot all about them.

"Their heads are about to explode," Wyatt said as the kids went wild.

The cake was huge, white with fine, amber decorations made of spun sugar. Rob and Julian cut the cake together and after sharing a few bites, they gave the next piece to Danny. The rest of the kids got theirs with a piece of spun sugar on each slice. It looked fancy so the kids didn't dive in right away, except for Ry. He demolished his piece and had half of it all over his face in seconds.

"You're wearing that cake," Sam said and picked up a napkin.

When Sam tried to wipe his face, Ry dodged him. "Nooo, I'll lick it." Then everyone watched Ry trying to lick frosting off his face and failing at it.

"Let that be a lesson to you," Theo teased Seth as they got their slices of cake.

Seth laughed and realized that he had relaxed some since they came in and he felt so out of place. Getting to talk to their friends and watching the kids having fun helped him. But it was mostly being

with Theo that did it. That's how everything was for him now, full of the unexpected joy of having Theo in his life.

That night they made love then lay entwined, upside down on the bed and too lazy to move.

"Let's just stay like this," Theo said with his face in the crook of Seth's neck.

Seth agreed easily. "OK."

"Oh, fuck," Theo moaned surging against him.

"What?" Seth wondered while enjoying the press of his naked body and his cock starting to get hard again.

"You feel too good. We'll never get any sleep."

"You feel even better, like I'm living some kind of dream," Seth told him and turned his head to kiss him softly. He didn't want to start up anything again.

That's because he had figured out why he got so choked up and emotional as he watched Rob and Julian getting married. He wanted that to be his future with Theo. Now Seth wondered if he should tell him.

"Weddings sure pack a punch. Someone should have warned me," Seth said into Theo's hair. "I had tears coming to my eyes, and I didn't even know why."

"Sometimes the love other people feel for each other can touch your heart," Theo said, and the tremor in his voice told Seth it had touched him too.

"We should do that some day," Seth blurted out, and that made Theo rise up to stare down at him.

"Are you proposing to me?"

Now Seth started to panic. He should say that he meant that they might get married one day in the future, who knows when. But that wasn't the truth. "I don't expect you to say yes. Not now. But maybe some day you might."

"So you're not asking me?" Theo challenged him. He was starting to breathe hard and his eyes had a liquid glow to them.

"I guess I'm scared," Seth said honestly and ran his hands over Theo's arms.

"Don't be. I'm not," Theo told him and leaned down for a kiss.

With Theo lending him his strength, Seth got the words out all in one breath, "I love you. Please marry me."

"Are you sure you don't just have wedding fever?" Theo asked.

"I'm sure. I belong with you. And no matter what your answer is, I'll be yours forever," Seth told him, his voice breaking.

Another kiss and Theo gave him his answer. "I want forever with

you. Yes, I'll marry you."

Seth tried to breathe as his heart lurched at Theo's words. No, he couldn't breathe, all he could do was clutch at Theo and moan his name. "I'm so happy it hurts," he managed to say in a rasping voice.

"Hey now," Theo told him and he kissed his face all over until Seth could calm down a little.

Raised up on one elbow, Theo stroked his hair then let his hand trail down over his chest. He must have felt the wild beating of Seth's heart because he said, "The answer was always going to be yes, because I want you to be mine so desperately. Because my love for you is the strongest, deepest thing I ever felt." His voice was hushed, and Theo's eyes when they turned soft and loving were the most beautiful thing in the world.

As Seth gazed at him and tried not to cry, he told him, "If I knew you existed I would have been dreaming about you all my life."

"You say some crazy stuff," Theo told him then wrapped his whole body around him.

Since he was talking crazy, Seth thought he might as well tell him, "You know I want cake and ice cream at my wedding. That means we have to do it in the summer."

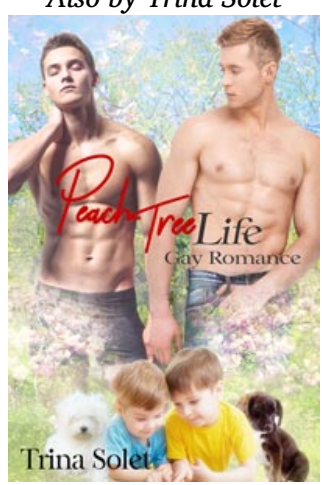
"You were serious about that?" Theo said.

"Yes, and Ace will agree with me so we'll outvote you."

Nose to nose with him, Theo gave him one of those dirty looks that always made Seth want to kiss him so he did. Already the painful feeling of happiness was hurting less, settling into something that was real and strong, that he could count on forever.

The End

Also by Trina Solet



Peach Tree Life

Wyatt was never the good brother. He was the troublemaker, the one who escaped to Europe when his family couldn't accept who he was. But now that his older brother is gone, Wyatt is the only one who can take care of his two little nephews, DJ and Riley.

Is Wyatt up to the daunting task? No one is sure, not even him.

It's a big change in his life, but his nephews need him. After losing their parents, the two little boys are heartbroken. Wyatt doesn't want to uproot them so he moves to the small town of Peach Tree. He doesn't expect small town life to be to his liking until he meets Sam, the young guy who works at the cafe in town.

They have an immediate connection, and Sam is the sweetest guy. But Sam is prone to panic attacks and he only just escaped his abusive ex.

Sam doesn't plan to get involved with anyone until Wyatt comes along. He thinks a real relationship between them is impossible, but Wyatt isn't so easily discouraged. He's a man who knows what he wants, and he's not afraid to go after it. Sam came into his life on the heels of tragedy and that makes Wyatt treasure him all the more.

Just when Wyatt is sure to get his way, trouble finds them. With Wyatt by his side, can Sam finally fight back against his fear, or will it wreck everything he found?

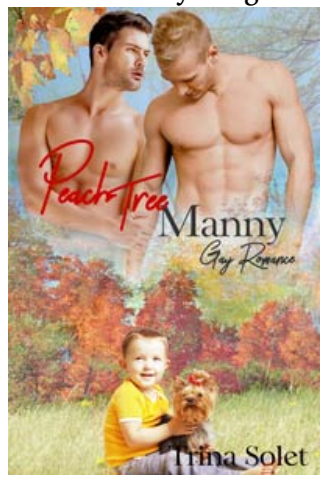
Peach Tree Love

Peach Tree works its magic on Mitch and Rico as the handyman with a kid and the college student without direction find exactly what they were looking for.

When a job offer falls through, Mitch agrees to fix up an old house that hides unexpected trouble. Rico is recruited to be his assistant and can't help but fall in love with the gruff handyman. Could Mitch ever feel the same?

Until he met Rico, Mitch believed he was straight. Now his whole word has been turned upside down. After all the hardships in his life,

could this be the one time when everything works out just right?



Peach Tree Manny

Julian Brenner doesn't have good memories of his childhood home in Peach Tree, but he's moving back there for the sake of his little brother. Little Danny has already been through so much, Julian wants him to have some peace and quiet.

That isn't what Peach Tree is known for, so it's a good thing Julian is bringing some backup. At first, he hires Rob as his assistant, but maybe what he really needs is a manny.

Rob doesn't seem like the type. He's a little rough around the edges and not afraid of a fight. His protective side is what Julian notices first, but it's Rob's kindness that wins him over.

But does Julian dare to fall in love. Both men have old pain and troubled histories to overcome. Will they realize their love was meant to be?

Peach Tree Baby

Living on the outskirts of a small town, busy running an inn, Andy doesn't like his chances when it comes to finding the perfect man. Plus

his leg was hurt in a car crash. The scars and the limp don't help his self-confidence. Not wanting to wait before building a family, Andy skips right to having a baby.

But maybe he gave up too soon. Andy brings his baby daughter home just in time for Christmas and hires a manager to help him run the inn.

Leo Copeland is the new manager, and he's hot, built and has a take-charge attitude. When Leo and his new dog need a place to stay, Andy offers to put him up at his family home.

It's only supposed to be for a little while, but Leo is good company and he's amazing with the baby. As their attraction keeps heating up, Andy starts thinking that he doesn't really want Leo to go.

That man just fits at the inn, in Peach Tree and quite possibly in Andy Brighton's life.

They're busier than ever preparing to host the reception for Mitch and Rico's Valentine's Day wedding when a threatening message rattles them both. Will Andy realize he finally found the perfect man, or will a secret from Leo's past make him lose faith in the man he has come to trust and depend on, the man he loves?

A Christmas Manny

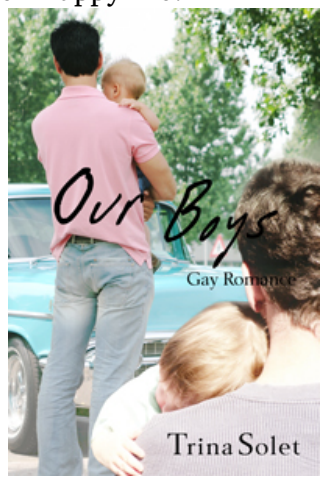
Christmas is approaching fast and Gary Radcliff is still recovering from an injury. He can use some help especially with his little boy, Scotty. Gary doesn't want him to be cooped up when there might be snow out there any day now. He hires Wayne to help him give his kid a happy Christmas.

Wayne has worked as a health aid before but never as a manny. He takes his work seriously, but it turns out that working for Gary and Scotty is more fun than work. Right away, he fits in with those two.

He also finds himself incredibly drawn to Gary. Unaware that Gary feels the same way, Wayne thinks it's hopeless. If only Wayne can be brave enough to speak up, their attraction might turn into so much

more.

It doesn't take much to ignite their desire, but will demands of real life get in the way of their happy life?



Our Boys

After getting burned in his last relationship, Diego isn't looking to get involved. He is willing to allow only one little guy into his heart. That little guy is his irrepressible, four-year-old son, Jamie. But Trevor, a young neighbor who just moved in, might turn out to be too much of a temptation for Diego.

Trevor is taking care of his one-year-old cousin, but he's worried he might lose custody. He has quite a few challenges in his life, and Diego is driven to help him overcome them.

As the two families bond, the guys find their feelings for each other growing stronger. It's only a matter of time before they'll have to admit that they found in each other everything they ever wanted.

The Forever Manny

Marshall Bowen is more comfortable sitting in a boardroom, but now he has his baby niece, Tessa, to take care of. Until very recently,

Marshall didn't even know he had a sister, and the baby is a complete shock to him. He's out of his comfort zone and doesn't know the first thing about taking care of a baby. But he'll have to learn fast.

He does have some help. Cody is his late sister's best friend, and he has become incredibly attached to the baby. After he and Cody meet, Marshall is determined to keep the young man around. It's only for Tessa's sake, of course. He would never indulge in his budding attraction to the baby's manny.

Cody is glad to help Marshall take care of Tessa, but it's only a temporary arrangement. Once Marshall gets the hang of parenting, Cody will go back to his old life. He can't stay Tessa's manny forever, can he?

But what will happen when Cody wants more? Will Marshall want a future with him?

A Bookworm for Christmas

Miles is not looking forward to a lonely Christmas when a chance encounter with his ex boss changes his prospects.

When Miles worked at his bookstore, Gavin was a strict boss and a secret crush. Gavin's life has changed since Miles saw him last, but he still seems unattainable.

Miles can't stay away from him though and ends up spending time with his little boy too. Benji is the big change in Gavin's life, and being a dad suits him perfectly. But will he see Miles as someone who can join their family, or will his misgivings win out in the end?

The Professor and the Manny

Ned needs a babysitter for his daughter, Mina. When he hires Jeff, he ends up with a manny and so much more.

Mina is a vulnerable child who has endured too many losses. Ned has given her a new life, but she doesn't come out of her shell for just anyone.

When Jeff comes into their lives, he wins her over and starts out babysitting for only a few hours a day. That's long enough for him to realize that he's incredibly attracted to Ned.

Ned feels the same way, but he's a professor and Jeff is a student at his college. Ned is determined to keep his distance. That only lasts until he learns that Jeff has been keeping something from him. When Ned finds out that Jeff has no place to live, he invites him home and hires him as Mina's manny.

There's no turning back now. Living in the same house, neither man can deny his feelings for long. But when danger disrupts their happy life, Jeff blames himself. Can Ned convince him to stay? The next time danger strikes, Jeff might be the only one who can protect what's most precious to them both.

Key To His Heart

Phillip Morton is a disciplined and self-assured young executive, but that's only on the surface. His heart is in turmoil. He has just discovered that his late brother might have left behind a child. This child is only a rumor, a possibility, but Phillip sets out to find him.

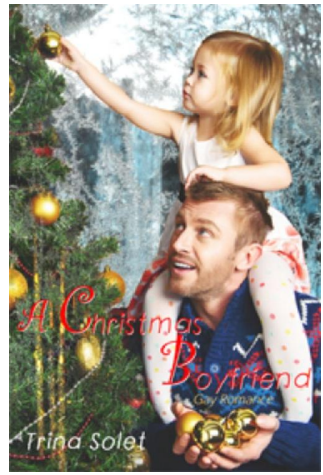
To help him with his search, he brings along Leon, his assistant. Leon is very young and new to his job. Phillip doesn't want things between them to turn too personal, but he needs Leon to keep him sane.

Even as he searches for his nephew, Phillip is afraid to hope. After the heart-wrenching loss of his estranged brother, it seems too much to expect that this child could be real.

It turns out that Ant, short for Anthony Morton Junior, is very real indeed. He is a sweet three-year-old living in precarious circumstances with an elderly relative. Phillip has found them just in time.

As Leon lends a hand with all the new challenges in Phillip's life, the two of them are growing closer every day. If only Leon can free himself of the demons from his childhood. While Leon's past still haunts him, he and Phillip can't rush into anything.

Will Phillip's love and patience win out in the end so they can all become a family?



A Christmas Boyfriend

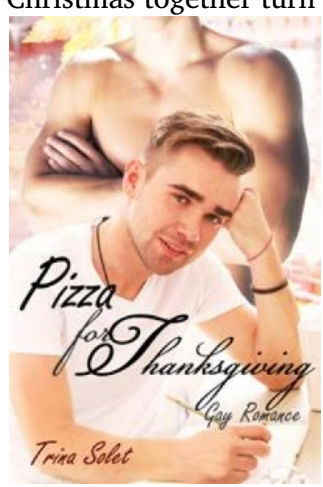
"Can you get me a man for Christmas?"

When he said those fateful words, Ben didn't know what he was setting in motion.

Ben is a busy dad to a four year old little girl. He doesn't have much time for a social life, but he wasn't serious when he asked for a man for Christmas. His daughter, Maya, doesn't know that. She is determined to play Santa and get her dad the gift he asked for.

The man she picks for her dad is her preschool teacher, Jason Kenney. Neither Jason nor Maya think he's the right man to be a present for Ben, so why is he standing there on Christmas Eve with a gift bow in his hair?

Smarting from a recent breakup, Jason isn't looking forward to the holidays. Despite his reservations, Jason gets tangled up with Ben. There is something about Ben that he just can't resist. As their feelings intensify, will spending Christmas together turn into something more?



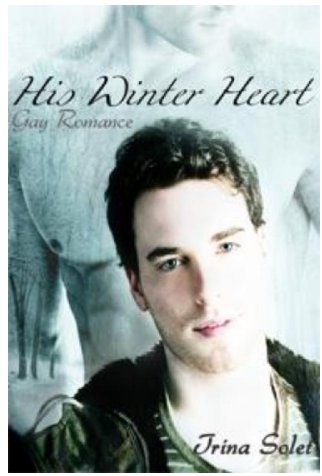
Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the

same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?



His Winter Heart

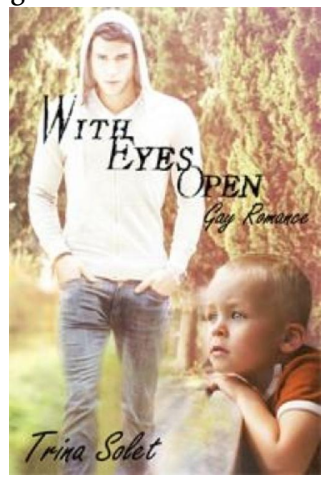
Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow

himself to love the younger man?



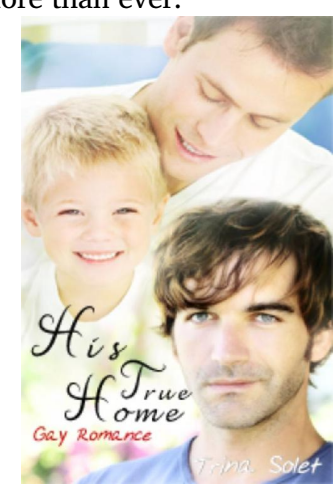
With Eyes Open

Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

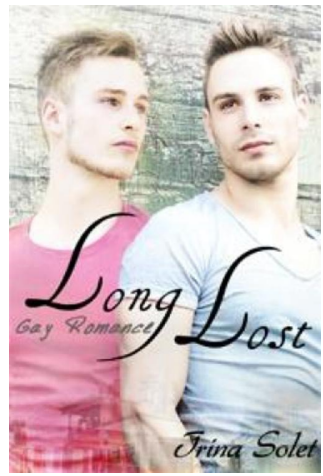
Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home

town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.



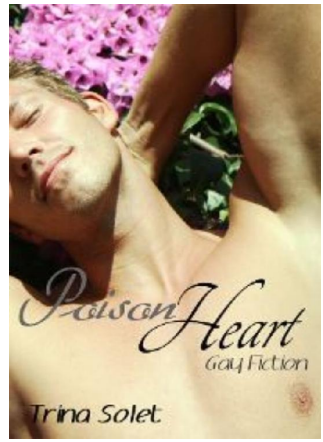
Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.



Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

A Midnight Thanksgiving

Alex and Vaughn have been frenemies for a while, but they never spent any time alone together. That all changes on Thanksgiving night. When they become concerned about a friend in crisis, Alex and Vaughn are thrown together as they go in search of him.

The guys make an unlikely team. Alex thinks Vaughn is too uptight and would never be interested in a carefree guy like him. Vaughn thinks Alex is irresponsible, but being around him breaks down his resistance. The more time they spend together, the closer they get. By the end of the night, they can't keep their hands off each other. But will they admit how they really feel or will it all be over when their mission ends?

River Child

Until this fateful night, Will Galen lived an ordinary life in his family cottage and peaceful village. Tonight Will has set out to finally satisfy his curiosity about the mysterious, forbidden river that everyone fears. He finds no answers at the riverside, but he does find a helpless child and takes him home.

Though the child is only a sweet, three-year-old boy, he is greeted with superstition and fear by Will's father and his grandmother. They claim the boy carries the river's curse and want to cast him out. To

keep the child safe, Will must take him away from there and not look back.

As he leaves behind his family and the place where he has lived all his life, Will finds one bright spot. The man he has been lusting after comes to his rescue and takes Will and the boy home with him.

Russ is a rough looking man with a big heart. Will is more taken with him every day, but what will happen when Russ discovers the secrets Will has been keeping about the boy?

Even if Russ can accept the strange child, their troubles are not over. As Will and Russ become close, they must risk everything when a terrible curse threatens to take away the little boy they have come to love and think of as their own.

Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a

nanny for a nice family, but they don’t need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?